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Fabrice Métais

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Of God's Word Terrestrial Acoustics: A Missed Call

Fabrice Métais

Abstract

To bring in *the name of God* in the context of a journal dedicated to the question of "audio mobility" technologies and practises in art is mainly a provocation that aims to question the general tendency in modern era (and, although in a less evident way, in the so-called post-modern era) to consider the subject firstly as a free, active, perceptive and reasoning *agent*. As Levinas pointed out, when facing the *otherness* of the other, the significance of meaning and experience cannot be described and considered solely within the dialectical totality of what *is* and what *is not*. "To be or not to be" is not the ultimate question, but rather to *whom* this very question is to be addressed. From a critical reading of husserlian and heideggerian phenomenologies, Levinas gave us promising clues for understanding the significance of the phenomenon as being primarily rooted (*rooted without roots*, beyond or below principles) within ethical *responsibility* and erotic *desire*. Therefore my aim is not to question the existence of God but rather to try – with Levinas – a radical reformulation of the existence of the world as the way for the subject to touch or be touched by the radical alterity of "what" is not reducible to the self: subjectivity as *being-in-the-world-for-the-other*. Focusing on the auditory dimension of experience, rather than on its imperious visual one – although without falling into a too atomistic conception of the senses – can open a path in this direction since the passivity of the relation to the world could be considered more patent in hearing than in seeing. But beyond an audio-focused reading of Levinas' philosophy, I would like to question it with a specific concern for technologies. Since Derrida has pointed out the originary compromise of transcendental idealism with the contingency of material inscription, we ought to consider that the ways through which the subject and the other get in touch with each other – the ways through which the

concreteness of the ethical and erotic relation *actually* happens – are *historically* constructed. The embodied relation with alterity occurs through an augmented body where nature and technology are not ultimately to be opposed: the *externalisation* of functional possibilities through tools and technological devices is a zoological feature of the human species (Leroi-Gourhan). The human's body being thereby modular – having parts of itself outside of itself – the gestures through which the subject gets in touch with the other are not only prolonged *in the present* by hand-held long distance transmission devices, but are also suspended outside of any phenomenon – outside any *present* – through the regime of inscription. By confronting levinassian phenomenology with the idea of a technologically augmented body, I will try an innovative view about what is at stake in "audio mobile" technologies: considering positively that the non-immediacy that transmission and inscription devices imply will offer new clues for a phenomenological approach to the "urgency" of ethical relationships and the voluptuousness of erotic ones.

The word "God" struggles to be a word. It aims towards what can't ultimately be contained in words, towards that which exceeds the realm of being. With Levinas: "We propose to call religion the bond that is established between the Same and the Other, without constituting a totality" (Levinas 1979, 40). Apart from the dogmas of established "religions", here there is question of how subjectivity makes contact with radical alterity and how technology takes part in the "acoustics" of this contact. Levinassian's phenomenological descriptions of the relation with the other will be confronted with the idea of a technological augmentation of embodiment. An innovative approach to subjective temporality as impatience will be introduced by using the mobile phone to challenge the distinction between orality and inscription.

The “experience” of Love: A Radical Exposure

Nobody knows what love is. One may say that love is a feeling, but then it could be argued that reifying feelings is just a way to empty them of their inherent bond with subjectivity – a way to miss their specific significance. Therefore to talk about love one must talk about the *experience of love*, a singular concern for subjectivity. To describe, consider, talk about the experience of love, one might first want to refer to the "science" of subjective experience, the science of phenomena: phenomenology.

But it is not given that phenomenology could provide a convincing account of the "experience" of love. According to Levinas, it is only by taking phenomenology to its very limits (Sebbah 2001) that ethical love (or concern) and erotic desire can be approached. Indeed, since husserlian phenomenology first aims to make a solid grounding for the veracity of objectivity, it might not be convenient to apprehend the radicality of the encounter with the “other *as other*.” And when in heideggerian existential analytic the significance of the phenomenon ultimately refers to the boundaries of the Dasein's structure, it is not obvious how the subject could be in touch with something – someone – that/who would positively exceed the totality of its ontological realm. By first focusing on the description of the experience of the *face to face* situation, Levinas points to a phenomenality where the direction of the relation between the subject and the exteriority is reversed:

Here, contrary to all the conditions for the visibility of objects, a being is not placed in the light of another but presents itself in the manifestation that should only announce it; it is present as directing this very manifestation – present before the manifestation, which only manifests it (Levinas 1979, 65).

Unlike strictly perceptive phenomenality, when facing the other the subject is not constituting exteriority through intentionality, in a movement that goes from itself to the outside. The otherness of the other penetrates subjectivity by directing the phenomenon. Thereby, reaching the limit of an intentional phenomenology, Levinas insists on the radical passivity of the ethical (and erotic) relation to the other: “The absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation” (Levinas 1979, 65-66). For Levinas, the revelation of the alterity of the other through its “speaking face” is an irruption *into* the world of a significance that exceeds the phenomenal realm – a radical alterity coming from a radical elsewhere, positively unreachable through the realm of the possible. When for Heidegger, the significance of being refers to its negation in the ultimate possibility for the Dasein to *not be* – i.e. “being-towards-death” – Levinas points out that the mystery of death is not “experienced” by the subject in a virile relation to its own finitude but in the concreteness of the ethical relation to the other as mortal. Thereby, subjectivity is described as a tension of *responsibility* – it emerges in the urge occurring between being called and the possibility of answering. In the whole *active* part of subjectivity – perception, action, constitution, freedom, possibility – lurks the significance of a radically passive exposure to alterity. Somehow, Levinas operates a copernician-like revolution of phenomenology since the subject ceases to be the center

of the world that it constitutes, but rather emerges from its relation to the otherness of the other, from its relation to a radical exteriority.

Between Phenomenology and Technology

My intention here is to engage in a discussion between levinassian phenomenology and technology. The precarious possibility of such a dialog relies on two arguments. The first refers to husserlian analysis of the subject's embodiment as a chiasmus: the subject's body is an interlacing between, on the one hand, a *leib* (a constituting body, phenomenological power/exposure) and a *körper* (a constituted object, observable and describable). Through this interlacement between the *constituting* and the *constituted*, a dialog between phenomenology and objective description can be established.¹ The second argument, inspired by Leroi-Gourhan's paleo-anthropologic approach (Leroi-Gourhan 1964), states that tools and technological devices are a prolongation, an *externalization*, of the human body – and thereby share the same constituting/constituted chiasmic structure. It is only through this interlacement – in the tool itself – of a phenomenal dimension *and* a describable objectivity that a place for a

¹ As determining as it could be, I am not going to engage into a detailed analysis of this argument here. However, it should be noted that it has been developed in the context of an analysis concerning the constitution of subjective spatiality: “L'action [au sens phénoménologique] est constituée comme mouvement articuloire [observé dans l'objectivité], la spatialité du corps propre est constituée comme dimension spatiale d'un bras liant ces articulations, etc. Et cette constitution se fait de manière à ce que les relations objectives qu'entretiennent entre eux ces répondants (mouvement, stimulation tactile, dimensions de l'organisme) soient suffisamment 'équivalentes' aux relations qu'entretiennent dans l'ordre de la genèse les composantes de l'expérience (action, sensation, spatialité du corps propre). On 'retrouve' ainsi dans l'objectivité la *forme même* de l'activité de la conscience.” (Lenay and Sebbah 2001, 68). It should also be noted that these investigations were made within a husserlian/merleau-pontian phenomenological context. To maintain their efficiency in the context of a levinassian phenomenology would require some profound reformulation.

dialog between phenomenological inquiries and technology (as a discourse on technological *objects*) can be found.

For Leroi-Gourhan, technology is a zoological feature of the human species.² Just like the lion has sharp teeth, and the giraffe has a long neck, the human has tools.³ But an important difference is found in the fact that, unlike the lion's teeth and the giraffe's neck, human's tools are separable from the biological body: they can remain by themselves in the world, waiting for a subject to take them and use them. A Human's body is a modular body – a body that is naturally incomplete, with parts of itself situated outside of itself, outside of actuality, within the realm of virtuality.

Tools are considered to be part of the body in two related ways. They are part of the actual body when they are taken in hand and used, they take part in the constitution of the experienced world: for example, the world experienced by a subject equipped with a hammer is one in which everything is fragile and breakable. But tools are also part of the body when they are not in use, being there as potentialities which constitute the world: the experienced world of the human subject is a world of tools – i.e. a world in which *virtuality is essential*. If such an approach of the experienced world as a world of (technical) possibilities has been largely explored by Heidegger in his *Being and Time* (Heidegger, Macquarrie and Robinson 2008), my concern here is to develop a

² And, in stating this, Leroi-Gourhan unquestionably challenges the traditional opposition between what is natural and what is artificial.

³ Concerning this topic, see also the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus and its reading by B. Stiegler (Stiegler 1994).

phenomenological approach to technology primarily concerned with the relation to the other – that is to say including precisely that which positively exceeds the realm of the possible.

If, on the one hand, Levinas should be our guide for a phenomenology in which the core of meaning relies on contact with the otherness of the other, on the other hand, it should be noted that the question of tools – the question of an augmented embodiment of the relation – is not directly addressed in his philosophy.⁴ Through the vocabulary he uses (face to face, orality, eyes, mouth, etc.) and the concrete situations he mobilizes as prototypical examples (the caress, maternity, the gift of a loaf of bread etc.), he most often refers to relationships that objectively rely on the *co-presence* of the subject and the other. The objective distance between bodies is "small" and negotiable for the unequipped biological body – the power of a natural voice, the length of an arm, the distance reachable by a non-augmented sight. It seems as if, in his descriptions of the ethical/erotic proximity, Levinas explicitly, does not consider the case of contact with the other occurring through the *mediation* of an externalized embodiment.

Since humans have always been technical animals, there is nothing new in the fact that their relationships have been mediated. Also, technologies specially dedicated to the contact between humans have been around for a while – we can take

⁴ Apart from the noticeable exception of the text entitled *Heidegger, Gagarine, and us* (Levinas 1997), where the question of technology is actually addressed but not in the perspective of an augmented embodiment of subjectivity.

paper/ink/enveloppe/address/mail-box as a typical example of such a technology. Through the dynamics of “digital convergence”, the mobile phone has undoubtedly become *the* technology of today’s mediated relationship to the other.

Mobile Phone and Exposure

If the mobile phone might appear as an individualized technical object (Simondon 1989), to understand its technology it has to be thought as part of a whole communications network system. The question of embodiment is not only the question of the body of a sole subject (using tools), but that of an embodied (and augmented) relation to the other.

The sensible – maternity, vulnerability, apprehension – binds the node of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of self. In this plot I am bound to others before being tied to my body (Levinas 1998, 76).⁵

The mobile phone then is not only a tool for action and perception that the subject can use freely; it is not only a tool that increases its powers over the world, its powers of constituting the world; it is not only an augmentation of the *I can* aspect of subjectivity. It is primarily an augmentation of the exposure to the otherness of the other. The ringing of the phone is not only *perceived* but is rather an interruption of the

⁵ The "apperception of self" is a reference to the husserlian descriptions of the subject's body. For Levinas, beyond, or before, a matter of perception, the body has to be the very organ of ethics and eros, the organ of gift and enjoyment.

phenomenon: when the phone rings, the subject does not only *receive* the information that someone is trying to reach it, but rather it is struck by the emergency of a call that it is mandated to answer.

Even if the freedom to not answer remains, the injunction to answer precedes the decision not to: the phone is a device of exposure, a device of revelation, an extension of the other's body that extends right to the subject's ear, a device of restlessness, unquietness, interruption of the phenomenon by the symptomatic emergency of a call coming from a radical alterity. Also, in mobile phone technologies, we can see a specific articulation between the pre-freedom exposure to the other, and the freedom itself: one can always turn one's phone to "silent mode", or even turn it off. The mobile phone is not only a tool that the other uses to strike the subject, it is a place of negotiations between radical exposure and free will. Mobile phone functionalities incarnate the ethical dilemma between the other and self since the subject keeps some control of the way through which his phenomenality is to be interrupted. Thereby it is also a technology of violence, a technology of deceit, a technology through which the subject *can* reduce the other to a manageable object. The very tension of subjectivity – namely, responsibility – incarnates through mobile phone technology, between the radical exposure to alterity and the imperious autonomy of ipseity.

Orality and Inscription

I would like to investigate this idea of an externalized relation as an issue regarding subjective temporality, where the negotiation – the meaningful tension – between the self and the other is incarnated within a technological mediation. To do so, I propose to firstly discuss the traditional opposition between orality and written words. Before attempting to challenge this distinction, it is necessary to recall that there is a long history of philosophical debate around this distinction. It goes back at least as far as Plato who, in his *writings*, relates the second dialog of Socrates with Phaedrus (Plato 2012). For Plato (or rather for Socrates), oral language is the only form that guarantees integrity, since the one who speaks *comes to the assistance of* his own speech, he is *present* along with the ideas his speech expresses. On the other hand, the written speech is separated from its writer and thereby under the threat of misinterpretation. Nobody is there to assist it, to protect it from misreadings, to guarantee its truth. According to Derrida (Derrida 1967), since Socrates – and despite the fact that his words were transmitted through the writings of Plato – orality and presence have always been privileged in (western) philosophical traditions, and subsequently in linguistic science. This is true until the advent of phenomenology, with the husserlian idea of “living speech” (Husserl, Dummett, and Moran 2008) – life in conjunction with idealities. Written words are only considered as a derivative – solely a helpful mnemonic, having no inherent role in the dynamics of meaning. As introduced above, this privilege given to oral speech – and to the co-presence of the speaker and the listener that goes with it – is still predominant in Levinas' philosophy: “The unique actuality of speech tears it from the situation in which it appears and which it seems to prolong. It brings what the

written word is already deprived of: mastery. Speech, better than a simple sign, is essentially magisterial” (Levinas 1979, 69).

For Levinas – as for Plato – the privileging of orality is founded on the co-presence of s/he who talks, alongside his/her speech. The absence of the orator in written speech is only considered negatively. Derrida is the first philosopher to consider the absence of the talker positively. He emphasizes the suspension of contact between the writer and the reader, through the conservation of a material inscription and outside of any experienced present (Derrida and Leavey 1989, 2011).

Mobile phone practices seem to challenge the strictness of the distinction between orality and written language: for example, when referring to "instant messaging", are we talking about something instantaneous, happening in flow; something where the speech is assisted by the one who talks; something where the speaker remains close to his/her speech, are we talking about something that resembles orality? Or are we talking about text, something that shows itself as letters and written words with explicit punctuation marks, something that will stay recorded somewhere as a trace? And what about a "voice mail"? Is it writing practice since it implies a recording and since the moment of talking is distinct from the moment of hearing? Or is it oral since one actually hears the voice of the other with the singularity of their vibrating body rather than dealing with the neutrality of the anonymous letters of the alphabet? Ultimately, even a regular phone

call challenges the traditional opposition between oral/presence and written/absence since the peculiar presence of the caller is fuelled by the significance of absence.

Beyond the opposition of orality and inscription, I wish to compose with two different but not mutually exclusive dimensions of contact with the other: on the one hand, the "presence of the otherness" of the one singular other within his speech (Levinas), and, on the other hand, the possibility of a suspension of contact, exterior to any phenomenality, through the sustainability of inscription (Derrida).

Time of Impatience: Suspended Contact

A "missed call" is not only the contrary of an incoming call that is *actually* received. I would argue that this is a separate functional mode of mobile phone technology. The mobile (and the whole network behind it) functions as an inscription device, a technology of a suspended contact between the subject and the other. This idea of a suspended contact will be confronted with the levinassian conception of time as developed in *Time and the Other* (Levinas 1987). In this early text, Levinas introduces the idea of time as intimately related to desire – a positively unpredictable future coming from the other. The erotic relation is the prototypical situation for his analysis:

[The caress is] a play with something elusive, a play absolutely without aim or plan not with that which may become ours and our self, but with something other, always inaccessible, always in the future. The caress is the anticipation of the pure becoming, without content. It is made up of this intensified hunger, of promises ever richer, opening new perspectives onto the ungraspable. It is nourishing by innumerable hungers. This intentionality of pleasure [*volupté*], directed purely and simply towards the future itself, and not an anticipation of any future events, has always been misrecognised by philosophical analysis (Levinas 1987, 89).

Through this phenomenological approach to the caress, Levinas gives an account of subjective temporality that is radically different from those developed by Husserl and Heidegger. A time that has nothing to do with projected possibilities or re-presentations of memories – for Levinas, the past as memories and the future as anticipation do not differ ultimately from the phenomenal present, they are only the presence of the past and the presence of the future, and not the past or the future themselves. The future as desire has nothing to do with the present, but is directly *inspired* by the radical alterity of the other, positively in-assimilable in a living phenomenal present. Levinas here opposes a subjective time lived (or suffered) as desire, to the somehow classical description of time as anticipations and memories.

But by referring to the prototypical situation of the caress, Levinas seems to once again privilege the experience of a minimal mediation between the subject and the other, a

skin to skin contact, a situation objectively describable as a co-presence. We might assume that through the contact of naked bodies the caress reaches, in climax, a minimal phenomenality, *without aim or plan*, thereby asymptotically tending toward a phenomenality without world, a phenomenality submerged by alterity. However, I would argue that *eros* starts long before *actual* skin contact, when the distance between bodies remains to be overcome – typically through letters, phone calls and messages; written words and signs. *Eros* occurs in the mediation of an externalized embodiment, through the inscriptions suspended outside biological bodies. *Eros* starts outside the realm of actuality, where gestures are suspended beyond any phenomenal presence, yielding to the contingency of material inscription.

I argue against the unquestioned privileging of spatial proximity, co-presence and immediacy; I wish to consider positively the significance of distance and absence within contact. Because, when mediated through inscription, contact gestures do not reach their target instantly, thus the absolute future of desire, the one that is absolutely extraneous to the present and positively unpredictable, has to flirt in some way with the time of memories and anticipations; retentions and protentions. When I send a message, I *know* – I *anticipate* – that it is going to *take time* for the other to get back to me. The time of desire is dilated through anticipation – *contaminated* by the time of clocks and programs.

Moreover, when mediated through inscription, the erotic contact does not occur through an uninterrupted flow of touch but rather it is quantized in packets: in the instant when I press the "send" button, I send a given *quantity* of gesture, a given quantity of contact. The positively unquantifiable contact with otherness flirts with the predisposition of technology to quantize – the physical constraints of the envelope or the limited number of characters of the sms message. Thereby the caress leaves the realm of flux to occur as distinct quantized *events*. The erotic relation is paced by technology, occurring as a sequence of punctual events – memorized and anticipated events. Through the realm of inscription – through the non-immediacy of suspension – the erotic relation is not only experienced in the out-of-the-world experience of a skin to skin climax, but also in the voluptuousness and impatience of a future that is both desired and anticipated – a sequence of events, a love *story* where the gap between events is haunted by an absent other. Time as impatience relies solely on the contamination between, on the one hand, a relation to the absolute otherness of the other (Levinas), and, on the other hand, the suspension of the gesture in the materiality of an inscription (Derrida). Time as impatience is the realization of *eros* through the realm of an externalized embodiment, when bodies are not restricted to their biological limits but have parts of themselves exterior to themselves. Mobile telephony, as both a technology of contact with the other and a technology of inscription, is a technology of impatience, a technology of haunting.

Conclusion

In this short text, a dialog between levinassian phenomenology and a philosophy of technology has led to a description of subjective time as a voluptuous impatience. Of course, from this starting point, many questions are still to be addressed: for instance, the question of the subjective experience of space, the significance of distance as an obstacle to go through to reach the other; the question of the third (person) and therefore the question of justice; the question of the specificity of digital/computational technology where the inscription is not static but ruled by the efficiency of automatic calculations; the question of the essential precarious nature of a contact exposed to contingency; etc.

Finally, in a reflexive movement, the last question of this text concerns its own role and position. Is it just some written words condemned to being a future archive – a participation in the anonymous accumulation of knowledge? Or is it a letter – language still somehow inhabited by the desire of its writer – still desperately looking for a particular someone to be addressed to?

R.S.V.P.

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Since 2005, Fabrice Métails' conceptual and artistic research has focussed on the confluence between, on one hand, an interrogation of desire and meaning, and on the other hand, an interrogation of technology. Conceptually, his work links the two through phenomenological (or related) theory (in particular Emmanuel Levinas's work), and through schools of thought that consider technology as anthropologically essential and constitutive (Derrida, B. Stiegler). Situated between relational aesthetics and media art, his creative practice opens the implications of this reflection beyond ideas and text, in the shape of installations, performances or sound works. Fabrice Metais obtained his MA degree in Engineering in 2005 (University of Technology of Compiègne) and his PhD entitled *Touching the other through the world: phenomenological, ethical and erotic approach of the technology* in May 2013 at the University of Technology of Compiègne. His theoretical PhD was completed by an installation/exhibition to be visited by two: *Amour Augmenté, Dramaturgie*. Since 2014, he is lecturer at the *Laboratoire d'Études en Sciences des Arts* (Aix-Marseille Université). In his most recent works, he has been questioning the metaphysical question of solipsism. <http://www.fabricemetais.fr>.