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Can One Hear Mobile Listening? The Public Ringtones Project and the Mediality of Listening

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[...] listening is above all else about one's position in the world of media, an attempt to negotiate it. It is about the balance among phenomena of administration and exchange, and the place of listening in that configuration (Sterne 2012, 90)

The *Sonneries publiques* (Public Ringtones) project is a series of speech-based ringtones for mobile phones that I initiated at the end of 2013. These ringtones consist of sound files which are “in circulation”, in the sense that they are public domain and can be downloaded free of charge from a dedicated Internet site.¹ From the moment they are put online, therefore, their distribution and their potential use fall outside of all control. Once accessed, they are activated according to the daily movements and calls received by those who have installed them. They circulate in what is public space as we know it in the era of the Internet – this dialectical space in which, as Jennifer Allen recently

¹ <http://sonneriespubliques.tumblr.com>. Accessed January 10, 2015.

commented (2014), traditional public space meets the web space with its characterisation as a space populated by digitalised content. While the first (traditional public space) is ever grappling with various aspects of privatisation – being rendered private – (that linked to advertising, which, for example, is present in any telephone ringtone associated with a brand, as well as the many individual re-appropriations and usages), web space has the specificity of making public, at least potentially and in spite of any strategies aiming to limit access, any piece of private data which is uploaded.

More broadly speaking, the project is part of a residency that took place in 2013 and 2014 at the centre for contemporary arts in Brétigny-sur-Orge, called *There's A Riot Goin' On*. This title was taken from a missing piece on the eponymous record by Sly & the Family Stone, which came out in 1971, and the singular status of which provides, in its own way, a commentary of what is involved in the *Public Ringtones* project. Listed in the album track list, without any comment or explanation to distinguish it, *There's A Riot Goin' On* is the last piece on side A, consisting of the moment as of which the needle on the pick-up is raised from the groove on the record, when the process of listening moves furtively from recorded music into the surrounding space. In its silence, it advocates a rebellion stripped of all materiality, seemingly able only to take form in the gaps in between things. From this perspective, *There's A Riot Goin' On* is characteristic of that which is seemingly neither visible nor audible and yet which is already in circulation. In the context of projects developed in the framework of the residency, however, the invisibility and inaudibility of this piece do not simply signify a silent rebellion. They also touch on social and economic aspects of life which, by their

immateriality and/or their omnipresence, cannot be apprehended directly but nevertheless orientate and model attitudes, behaviours and discourse, social interactions and everyday activities. As one of the residency creations, the *Public Ringtones* project focuses more specifically on everyday sounds mediated through communications apparatuses and the relation to public space played out therein.

The resonance of ringtones in the neoliberal soundscape

Ringtones for mobile phones are still a relatively recent phenomenon, from both an economic and a cultural point of view, with their popularisation dating from the end of the 1990s. As Sumanth Gopinath notes, while the apogee of the economic bubble that established the ringtone industry would now seem to belong to the near past of the 1990s, this development was nonetheless central to the growth of the industry serving the mobile entertainment market, the worldwide turnover for which reached approximately thirty three billion dollars in 2011. Above all, however, the cultural transformations linked to the phenomenon have taken on an entirely different rhythm and lifespan to those of a mere speculative bubble (Gopinath 2013). Today these ringtones are omnipresent in public space and public transport, as well as in spaces (libraries, classrooms, hospitals, cinemas and so on) in which they are banned, or rather in which an express request is made to put mobile phones on silent, thereby revealing their ubiquity.² Fifteen years ago, these few repeated notes could still mark our spirits

² Conceived in reaction to such a phenomenon, we might mention here the paradoxical, because silent, ringtone created by the artist Jonathon Keats, in homage to John Cage, and distributed by Start Mobile: *My Cage (Silence for Cellphone)* (2007), see Daniels and Arns 2012, 262.

like so many catchy jingles among the multitude of sounds which make up urban living, raising the question, in this new century, of what we imagine to have been the manner of listening (and therefore its reconfiguration) of the contemporaries of Luigi Russolo when faced with the “new” sounds of industrialisation. Today, ringtones have lost their power to surprise us. They may unexpectedly annoy us or confuse us when we mistake them for those of our own devices, but they are now part of the set of audio stimuli which accompany our daily movements. Ringing periodically at intervals during individuals’ daily journeys and perambulations, they take their place in the public sphere like so many mobile markers contributing to the make-up of a territory with undefined, because in constant movement, boundaries and henceforth potentially laying claim to any space liable to succumb to their protracted resonance. This is something that telecoms companies have made an integral part of their marketing strategies, using ringtones as a sound component of brand identities.³

The transformations which accompany the development of mobile ringtones do not only concern soundscape, but also necessarily and concomitantly the listening attitudes and, more generally, behaviours induced by the devices whose activation they signal (i.e. smartphones and other mobile phones). As technical devices, they involve gestures resulting in part from older, related technologies (primarily the telephone and walkman) which they rework and adapt, as well as new usages which alter our relationship with communication, how we listen to music, our immediate environment and, more broadly speaking, other people. In other words, they belong to the group of

³ As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987, 315) note: “The territory is not primary in relation to the qualitative mark; it is the mark that makes the territory.” On relationships to sound space as an itinerary, see also Saladin 2014.

objects Giorgio Agamben, in the wake of Michel Foucault, calls “apparatuses.” They are even an exemplary case of these, for which the philosopher does not hide having “developed an implacable hatred”, due to the increased abstraction of the relationships between individuals, which, according to him, they bring about (Agamben 2009, 16). Thus, following a brief genealogy of the concept, Agamben defines an apparatus as being “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (2009, 14). With respect to the mobile phone, moreover, these displacements should be considered in the light of the device’s economic context, which informs its features and the uses to which it is put (appropriations), as well as the singular relationships it introduces into public space: the success of mobile phone ringtones relies principally on the ideology of customisation, which characterises the marketing dynamics of cultural neoliberalism.⁴ The principle apparatus of the contemporary world, the mobile phone, and, through it, the ringtones which signal its use, should neither be refuted nor underestimated in the current understanding of relationships to listening, whether societal or musical and which are part of our everyday, in as much as it is an implicit driver of these and transforms behaviours in relation to them, doubtless far beyond its own use.

Mediatised listening as plastic listening

⁴ On the ideology of customisation, see Gopinath 2013, 31-35, 206-7.

While, as Agamben recognises, apparatuses have been around as long as we have, his disquiet comes from the fact that, according to him, “today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus” (2009, 15) – something which the omnipresence of mobile ringtones would seem to confirm. Nevertheless, the process by which modern listening has been crafted by the technology of the telephone has been a gradual one. As Jonathan Sterne (2003) tells us, the history of the techniques of sound reproduction continuously comes together with telephony research, from which many inventions are borrowed, bringing the complicity between recording and communications technologies into stark relief and thus also the respective modes of listening they induce. The history of listening, at least since the invention of recording, has, then, also been a history of devices and instruments. We may therefore ask whether talking of non-mediatised listening today – that is to say listening that is not reliant on devices – makes any sense and, incidentally, whether the concept of “schizophonia” developed by R. Murray Schafer (1977, 90-91) does not expose its own limitations by placing a hierarchy on different ways of accessing the experience of sound. According to Sterne, the problem is that the very awareness that we might have pretensions to non-mediatised listening is itself informed by mediality: “Perceptual technics increasingly shapes the sounds, sights, tastes, smells, and surfaces we experience. Mediality increasingly subtends everything we claim to know about a sensing subject in the state of nature” (2012, 243). If we approach things from another angle, going from communications towards music, the relationship between listening and the media that disseminate it would already seem to be that observed by Peter Szendy with respect to musical listening and its instruments, which –

from arrangement to phonographic prostheses and other listening machines – permit “plastic” if not critical listening:

“In this new *organology of our ears*, it is becoming ever more difficult to distinguish between the *organ* and the *instrument*. Thus, in the Greek etymology of *organon*, organology [...] is both that of the closest and most intimate of our listening organs – our auricles and eardrums – *and* that of instruments of all types, more or less mechanical or automatic, which aid our listening.” (Szendy 2001, 163).

While consensus seems to have been reached concerning instruments which extend or engage us in musical listening, it is interesting to note that such a relationship continues to cause offense as soon as we move onto a discussion of media. While we do not suggest Agamben’s warnings be disregarded, does the question not open up new lines of enquiry if we consider, as Sterne suggests, that media can just as well give rise to usages that we usually see as being solely those of instruments?⁵

Reflexive ringtones

Following his examination of the behavioural modelling produced by apparatuses, Agamben questions himself on the attitude to be taken in the face of the generalisation of such a situation: “In what way, then, can we confront this situation, what strategy must we follow in our everyday hand-to-hand struggle with apparatuses?” He continues

⁵ See Sterne 2005. We should add that the use of media as instruments is indeed very much at the heart of a number of sound art practices. On this point, see in particular Kelly 2009.

by saying, “what we are looking for is neither simply to destroy them nor, as some naively suggest, to use them in the correct way” (2009, 15). Such measured usage, laying claim to a positive negotiation with apparatuses, through the process of subjectification they imply, has little value for Agamben. Rather, he sees the particularity of contemporary apparatuses as being to bring together, to the point of making them impossible to differentiate any process of subjectification with its opposite, namely the process of desubjectification. Once again, the mobile phone is identified as being a typical example: “In the nontruth of the subject, its own truth is no longer at stake. He who lets himself be captured by the ‘cellular telephone’ apparatus – whatever the intensity of the desire that has driven him – cannot acquire a new subjectivity, but only a number through which he can, eventually, be controlled” (Agamben 2009, 21). All the same, the philosopher is not content to submit to disappointment but aims to understand the logic at work in order to combat it with a critical stance. The redemption suggested by Agamben finds its synthesis in the concept of “profanation”, understood as “the counter-apparatus that restores to common use what sacrifice had separated and divided” (Agamben 2009, 19; Agamben 2007).

The *Public Ringtones* project is less a proposal for the direct application of such an approach than a modest attempt to create a reflexive experience, that, inherent in the consideration of an everyday listening situation, is attuned to the apparatus which conditions it. The strategy adopted is as old as the world, or at least as old as situationism: that of *détournement*. The speaker, which all mobile phones are equipped with and which is used both to listen to the person on the other end and by the ringtone

to alert the user to their call, is here used as a technical means of disseminating and propagating phrases, which have the particularity, in most cases, of examining the process of listening, the behaviours triggered by the apparatus of the mobile phone activated by a ringtone and, more generally, the usages that we put phones to. Available to download free of charge in both English and French in standard mobile phone formats, these speech-based statements come from various sources: expressions from daily life and aphorisms and quotes from artists and theoreticians now rendered anonymous. Pronounced by computer animated voices (some masculine, some feminine), they consist of phrases such as: “Listen”; “Language is not transparent”; “Act as if nothing had happened”; “There is no such thing as silence”; “Today I won’t answer”; “Public space is a strategic space”; “Can one hear listening?”; “Between two ringtones, silence”; “If to hear is to understand the sense, to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning”; “The distance from business at large is a luxury which only that business confers”; etc. There are currently around twenty ringtones but they are still being added to, with the range of speech-based statements developing in the manner of a work in progress.

The propagation and unobtrusiveness of acousmatic voices

While there's nothing new in using speech in mobile ringtones (for example, pre-packaged ringtones can be found online with samples of famous lines from films or current media events), they are nevertheless still relatively little-used compared to musical ringtones. In a singular fashion, they call out to those confronted with them, by

means of the semantic nature of the phrases they convey. The power of their appeal is, however, doubtless as much due to the acousmatic nature of the voices that are broadcast: “It is a voice in search of an origin, in search of a body, but even when it finds its body, it turns out that this doesn’t quite work, the voice doesn’t stick to the body, it is an excrescence which doesn’t match the body [...]” (Dolar 2006, 62). As Mladen Dolar remarks, since its Pythagorean origins, the acousmatic voice is marked by a mysterious, almost spectral, authority, which is so often used as a cinematographic effect, haunting those who listen to it and the space in which it resounds, becoming “omnipresent and omnipotent” (2006, 60-61). However, it is also, today, the everyday voice of media (popularised first of all by the telephone and a component of radio, through recordings, and audiovisual media). It gradually lost its power as it became commonplace or, rather, we should say its power became inflected in the mix of ordinary experience, out of which all that can be heard is a voice as an object: “It is not the haunting voice impossible to pin down to source; rather, it appears in the void from which it is supposed to stem but which it does not fit, an effect without a proper cause” (Dolar 2006, 70).

A final aspect of the *Public Ringtones* project concerns both the discreet and contingent nature of its activation. Unless we have scheduled a call at a precise time, it is generally impossible to know when we will receive a call on our mobile phones. We may be in the street, at work, at a museum or at the supermarket, in places where there is too much noise for us to hear the ringtone or in other places where we would have been better off turning the device off. In any case, the moment when the sound is triggered is not controlled by the user. The speech-based statements of these ringtones are thus

disseminated according to a score that is indeterminate, or at least dictated by the temporality and frequency of the user's communications, becoming audible in fits and starts and immediately disappearing again once the phone has been answered or the number of repetitions of the ringtone is exhausted.

And then, there is also the unobtrusiveness of the process. The very principle of mobile ringtones is to signal the reception of a call and therefore capture our attention.

However, because of their omnipresence in public space, we are not necessarily all that attentive to the ringtones continually sounding around us, including those of our own devices. Traffic and the sound environment can hide them, their commonplace sing-song can be easily confused with those of others, or we may even be absorbed in a phone conversation ourselves. Thus, although they do disseminate acousmatic voices, these speech-based ringtones can easily go unnoticed. Nevertheless, they are formulated within public space, whether intermixed with the many discussions going on in public transport or disturbing the silence of a queue, whether drawing attention to themselves or leaving those in their surroundings unmoved. Max Neuhaus thought it was particularly important that those who passed through his sound installations in public space could not notice them (Joseph 2009, 66). There is nothing capricious in the artist's take here. Rather, it highlights the decisive structuring of the relationship between the sound of his installation and its context within the listening experience proposed. Regarding an installation such as *Times Square* (New York, 1977), which could in effect go unnoticed by the majority of the several thousands of people passing through it each day, the artist noted that just because of its very unobtrusiveness, it did

not so much alter the aural focus of those who noticed it but rather altered their contextual focus (Neuhaus 1994). In the same manner, an imprint for contextual listening is at work in the relationship with the mobile phone apparatus potentiated in the unobtrusive and unexpected propagation of the *Public Ringtones* project, an imprint to be understood in terms of the intertwining of its environmental, technical, cultural and economic dimensions.

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Biography

Matthieu Saladin is artist and musician. His practice takes place in a conceptual approach. He is interested in the history of artistic forms and creative process, and in the relationships between art and society from a political and economic point of view. He is Senior Lecturer in Visual Arts at the University of Paris 8, Vincennes – Saint-Denis, member of laboratory TEAMeD (AI-AC) and research associate at the Institute ACTE (University of Paris 1 – Panthéon-Sorbonne, CNRS UMR 8218). His research is on aesthetics of experimental music and sound art. He is editor in chief of *Tacet* and works in *Volume!* and *Revue & Corrigée*. www.matthieusaladin.org.