Hearing Loss

Leigh Eric Schmidt

The voices of the past are especially lost to us. The world of unrecorded sound is irrecuperable, so the disjunction that separates our ears from what people heard in the past are doubly profound. I can see evangelist George Whitefield’s crossed eyes in a portrait; I can still see some of the pulpits from which he preached; I can pore over his sermons; I can read his journals. But I can never lend him my ears or eavesdrop on his prayers. Almost all of history is eerily silent and so, to evoke those stilled and faded voices, the historian must act as a kind of necromancer. The historian’s ventriloquy, like that of the Witch of Endor, allows the living to hear the dead. And that is the inevitable direction of travel: historians bring the past into the present, a conversation that when necessary rings with contemporary questions.

With the sense of hearing, the presence of the contemporary at the historian’s table has created not only resonance but also an excess of clarity about the past. This is especially evident in two sprawling discourses about hearing’s modern diminution, twin narrative structures of loss and absence that have taken on the aura of the universal. The first involves the eye’s clear eclipse of the ear, the decline of listening in the face of the ascendant power of vision in modern culture. The second concerns the dwindling of hearing as a spiritual sense and the lost presence of divine speech – that is, the peculiar acoustics of modern forms of alienation, disillusionment, and secularism. Recognizing how

the sense of hearing has been framed within the metanarratives of modernity is a prerequisite for a more intricate historical narrative. It allows for acknowledgement of the universalized philosophical and religious inscriptions with which modern ears have been marked. The prisoners in Plato’s cave, it is easily forgotten, were troubled not only by the flickering images but also by the echoes. What historians hear reflected back at them often proves to be little more than the sounds of their own tongues, but this particular treachery of knowledge is a reality to face, not efface.

**More than Meets the Eye**

The hearing impairments of modernity are so often presented as extensive and profound that one is sometimes tempted to scramble for a hearing-aid, or perhaps the early modern equivalent – an ear trumpet. As much of the writing on the modern sensorium has argued or presumed, vision is the dominant sense of modernity, the other senses being comparably repressed (such as smell) or vestigial (such as hearing’s former centrality in oral cultures). In the very long view, the shift from orality to literacy – according, most famously, to Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan – gradually transformed people from engaged speakers and listeners into silent scanners of written words, isolated readers in the linear world of texts. The print revolution of the early modern period sharply accelerated this bending toward visuality, this hearing loss, as books, newspapers, tracts, broadsides, charts, and Bibles flooded the cultural marketplace. Words became printed objects more than breathed speech, things to be seen rather than voices to be heard.

With its clear-eyed pursuit of detached observation, imperial sweep, and visual instrumentation, the Enlightenment was the keystone in the arch of the eye’s ascendancy. The ocular obsession of Enlightenment thought, as historian of the senses Constance Classen has recently labelled it, served to clinch the gaze’s domination of the modern sensorium. So the favoured story goes. From this critical perspective, the consumer society of spectacle, with its mediated and cinematic pleasures, becomes little more than the froth on the Enlightenment’s visual wave, the bedazzled eyes of the shopper and the spectator only redoubling vision’s power. With Chance the gardener, in the film *Being There*, we moderns like to watch. In a culture of science, spectacle, surveillance, sexism, shopping, and simulacra (to conflate the views of many cultural critics into one), voyeurism is often the least of the eye’s transgressions (Classen 1993a).

That ocularcentrism is peculiarly modern may seem at first glance surprising, especially given the deep-rootedness of such visuality in classical orderings of the senses. For both knowledge and delight, the sense of sight was, according to Aristotle, ‘above all others’; it was the most developed sense, the clearest and most discerning, the one most able to bring ‘to light many differences between things’. Hearing was a close second, superior for its conduciveness to learning. Taste and touch, associated with animality, had the ‘least honour’. Smell fell as a mediator in the middle. Despite Christian reservations about the dangers of the eye and its seductions, this hierarchic view of the senses was widely replicated in theological terms from Augustine onward, including Aquinas’s repetition of sight’s crowning perfection in the *Summa Theologica* (followed still by hearing and smell, then by taste and touch). In commentary on the senses, this has been one of most deep-seated philosophical formulas – to follow the ancients in establishing a hierarchy of perception, a system of nobility. Though hearing has had its apologists, from Laërtius in the fourth century to Charles de Bovelles in the sixteenth to Walter Ong in the twentieth, sight has commonly stood at the apex for more than two millennia. Even after the time-worn suppositions have largely passed that made such rankings seem so sensible – ordered relationships of honour and nobility are not how one would think modern citizens would imagine the senses – the Aristotelian forms of appraisal have continued, often with a vengeance.¹

If the supreme nobility of sight is thus deeply ingrained in Western religious and philosophical traditions, many nonetheless argue that this privileging of visuality reached its apogee only during the Enlightenment and its aftermath. Modernity is seen as distinctly ocularcentric, even hypervisual; it is marked, as philosopher Jaques Ellul puts it, by ‘the unconditional victory of the visual and images’. Historian Martin Jay, in his monumental account of modern ocularcentrism, has surveyed the dominance of the eyes and the ambivalences that power has generated, especially since the ascent of what he calls Cartesian perspectivalism. It is evident, Jay concludes that the dawn of the modern era was accompanied by the vigorous privileging of vision. From the curious, observant scientist to the exhibitionist, self-displaying courtier, from the private reader of printed books to the painter of perspectival landscapes, from the map-making colonizer of foreign lands to the quantifying businessman guided by instrumental rationality, modern men and women opened their eyes and beheld a world unveiled to their eager gaze.
While acknowledging some Enlightenment dissenters from the visual paradigm, Jay nonetheless builds on and replicates the hierarchy of the senses in which sight is the noblest and most powerful. Whether in Francis Bacon’s aphorism, ‘I admit nothing but on the faith of the eyes’, or in Thomas Reid’s, ‘Of all the faculties called the five senses, sight is without doubt the noblest’, Jay lifts up vision as ‘the dominant sense in the modern world’. He also presents the technologies of vision – from the microscope to the panopticon – as the quintessential instruments of the modern ‘scopic regime’. Sight, ‘the most comprehensive of all our senses’, as John Locke concluded in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, reigns with unquestioned supremacy over the Enlightenment enterprise.2

The counterpart to the history of increasing ocularcentrism has been the history of diminished hearing. As an aspect of cultural history, this account of the senses was pioneered by the Annales school, especially Lucien Febvre and Robert Mandrou. In an evocative section entitled ‘Smells, Tastes, and Sounds’ in The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century, Febvre commented of Rabelais and his contemporaries: ‘They were open-air men, seeing nature but also feeling, sniffing, touching, breathing her through all their senses.’ Smell and hearing for pre-Cartesians, Febvre argued, ‘were exercised much more and were more highly developed (or less atrophied) than ours’. The sixteenth century did not see first, he concluded; ‘it heard and smelled, it sniffed the air and caught sound’ (pace the considerable evidence that Aristotelian privileges were still widely accorded to sight). Only in the seventeenth century was this experiential hierarchy reordered, Febvre hypothesized; only then was ‘vision unleashed in the world of science as it was in the world of physical sensations, and the world of beauty as well’. Mandrou followed Febvre in detailing a history of hearing loss in his inventory of the senses in early modern France: sight, ‘dominant today, stood in third position’, he calculated, ‘a long way behind hearing and touch. The eye, which organises, classifies and orders, was not the favourite organ of a period which preferred to listen.’ The quotidian evidences for such claims were slim – a touch of poetry here, a smirking of Luther there – but the conclusions were certainly enticing, especially because they meshed so well with wider cultural criticism of the modern emergence of a society of cold observation and spectacular consumption.3

If there was thinness to these early attempts to incorporate perceptual modalities into the history of mentalités, subsequent efforts in French historiography to offer a historical anthropology of the senses have been richer and more nuanced. This is especially evident in the work of Alain Corbin who, in The Foul and the Fragrant, Village Bells, and Time, Desire and Horror, has plotted ‘the organisation and balance of the senses’ in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, notably the shifting thresholds of the tolerable and the intolerable, the sensory gauges of the pure and the polluted. Smell, in particular, became the dangerous (and hence alluring) sense of the period, used repeatedly to imagine social difference – that is, to distinguish the refined and the reasonable from the uncivilized, the erotic, the diseased, the animal, and the unclean. Thresholds around sound were similarly reworked. Corbin has argued, and the construction of the category of noise also reverberated off the cavernous walls of the social imagination. By analysing fragrances and odours as well as tolling bells, Corbin has broken out of the vision-dominated storyline and has brilliantly connected the pursuit of these sensory modes to social representations. With an evocative subtlety, Corbin shows the limits of the eye’s modern ascendancy by tracking the powerful emanations of sound and odour, both of which were so ambiguously intertwined with fear, desire, memory, and difference.4

The history of the senses has hardly been left to the French alone. On the North American side, Father Walter Ong – historian, literary critic, cultural commentator, and Jesuit – has been the most sustained interpreter of hearing’s modern diminution, again offering a historical account that is intended simultaneously as a critique of modern visuality and its disenchantsments. Ong’s view is irredescent as he moves from ancient ‘oral-aural’ cultures through literacy and prints to the visualism of modern science to the ‘secondary orality’ of the electronic media (this last ascendency still fails to reverse the prevailing epistemic regime of detached observation and silent reading). With a deeply Pauline conviction guiding him – faith comes through hearing – Ong offers his own metaphysics of sound, his own homily on the immediate face-to-face encounters of speakers and listeners in oral cultures, on the human and divine presences in spoken words. For Ong, the ear, or what T. S. Eliot called ‘the auditory imagination’, stands as the other to modernity’s fractioning eye, the embodiment of the bardic and the inspired, and the now muted vehicle of both community and God's revelation. To understand the richness of oral traditions is, at some level, restorationalist: it is, for Ong, a way to reconnect to the auditory modes that underpin scripture itself and that make possible Christian redemption.5

Ong’s development of the sensorium as a domain for religious and cultural history, more than his metaphysics or his sweeping history from orality to literacy to visuality, remains a generative contribution.
Like Jay's focus on ocularcentrism, Ong's picture of 'visualist man' as the presiding power over modernity left the auditory without much of a history after the Enlightenment – after the Lockean assimilation of 'the entire sensorium to sight', after the early modern 'watershed dividing residually oral culture from typographical culture', after the learned quest for 'total written control over the spoken word', after the devocalisation of the universe through the visual objectification of the physical world. How could listening have a hearing in the face of such a lofty mythology about the eye's dominion? Ong, one of the ear's great apologists, ironically helped sever it from the history of the Enlightenment and the modern aftermath.6

Dismay in the 1950s and 1960s about shifting patterns in communications, about human senses vastly extended and overwhelmed by technological change, gave Ong's grand historical narrative a propitious timing. But it was Ong's mentor, Marshall McLuhan, who made it chic. As technological guide and probing analyst, McLuhan was the epigrammatic therapist to those who felt the 'collective sanity of contemporary society was fraying under the influence of the new media. In offering up a comprehensive myth of Western history timed to the revolutions in media, McLuhan saw modernity as built on the inexorable rise of a Newtonian sight, a 'cool visual detachment' again made concrete via the vast extension of typography in the early modern world. Even as successive waves of media innovations – the telegraph, telephone, phonograph, radio, and television – were unravelling this print culture, the visuality at the heart of the Gutenberg revolution remained in McLuhan's account a defining matrix for the making of modern knowledge.7

Crucial to McLuhan's construction of his mythology of modern Western visuality were common rhetorical strategies of alterity. The other to this Western technology and epistemology was for McLuhan the 'ear culture' of tribal, non-literate peoples in which spoken words had 'magical resonance'. With an unreflective colonialist lens, McLuhan made Africa his imaginary for constructing through black-and-white contrast a sense of which modern Europeans and North Americans were at their epistemic core. 'The African' lived in 'the magical world of the ear', while modern Western 'typographic man' lived in 'the neutral visual world' of the eye. The one was a world of vision, objectification, and progress; the other a world of sound, magic and timelessness. The animated intensity of the auditory was something that the lettered had been forced to set aside but that oral peoples all experienced – tribal worlds, which were characterised by an 'overwhelming tyranny of the ear over the eye'.8 If McLuhan, as a Catholic convert, shared Ong's anti-modern yearning for the living presence of Christianity's revivified Word, He was also far more fearful than his Jesuit companion about the return of the repressed (evident in his imagining of the 'tribal drum of radio' and his condescension toward Romantic 'irrationalists' like Mircea Eliade). At best ambivalent about the revival of a 'primitive' aurality through the new electronic media, McLuhan wanted to engineer a new synthesis, an orderly transformation in this momentous sensory struggle: 'There can be no greater contradiction or clash in human cultures than that between those representing the eye and the ear', he exhorted with typical excess. He wanted to move people through the entrancing effects of the new media and to awaken them from the hypnotic modern drugs of television and advertising. He hoped to stay 'the return to the Africa within' (McLuhan 1961, 1964, 1969).

McLuhan's cultural juxtapositions make all too apparent how the discourse of modern Western visuality has often rested on a larger racialized frame of comparison: 'the inability of oral and intuitive oriental culture', as McLuhan phrased it in Understanding Media, 'to meet with the rational, visual European patterns of experience'. Given such a grand story of modern ocularcentrism, a history of modern aurality is hardly possible – especially a history of religious modes of hearing, because, in this myth, the very origin of modern culture is grounded in the exclusion of the 'primitive' or 'ancient' ecstasies of listening. The otherness, blackness, or primalness of the auditory keeps it from having a history within modern Western culture (at least, on McLuhan's terms, in between the Gutenberg revolution and the twentieth-century proliferation of electronic media). Accounts of bardic songs, narratives of oracular voices, encounters with oral scriptures, and stories of mystical auditions are plots that work for 'other' cultures – societies that are all ears – not modern ones that are all eyes. 'With them the binding power of the oral tradition is so strong', anthropologist Edmund Carpenter wrote of Eskimo perception, 'to make the eye subservient to the ear ... In our society, to be real, a thing must be visible ... We trust the eye, not the ear.' In a word, we look, they listen. If McLuhan's badinage and Carpenter's ethnographic adaptations now seem exotic themselves, this discursive polarity nonetheless lingers. In a necessarily more subtle form, the storyline continues to structure descriptions of a Western sensory model' of visuality in contrast to the complex orality of 'premodern' cultures – that is, to divide the world between us and them.9

These, then, are two of the larger twentieth-century motifs around which the story of modern vision and hearing has been plotted:
a hierarchy of the senses, with sight vastly ennobled and hearing sharply diminished; and
- a marked dichotomy between eye and ear cultures that has commonly drawn on racialized constrictions of Western rationality and ecstatic primitivism.

What such narratives demand is not a carnivalesque reversal — not a dethroning of the eye and a raising up of the ear; that would only perpetuate the hierarchic, oppositional convention.

As Ong’s own theology of listening suggests, to romanticize hearing at the expense of vision is an all-too-common counter-Enlightenment move already; it hardly needs reamplification. Instead, as in the work of Alain Corbin, the multisensory complexity of the social, religious, aesthetic, and erotic imaginations of the culture of the Enlightenment and its successors warrants further attention. The modern sensorium remains more intricate and uneven, its perceptual disciplines and experiential modes more diffuse and heterogeneous, than the discourses of Western visuality and ocularcentrism allow. This is true of the religious dimensions of the sensorium, but it is also true of its Enlightenment valences, even that notorious source of scopic domination, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century natural philosophy.

The learned from Bacon and Mersenne onward were intent on advancing not only optics, but also acoustics — a field of enquiry that was broadly extended in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bringing together physics, anatomy, and music, the newly demarcated science of sound throve as part of the expanding experimental philosophy. Bacon, for example, was as intent on listening as on viewing, any self-profession about singular reliance on the eye to the contrary. In the New Atlantis (1627), his blueprint for a model college to advance learning, Bacon envisioned ‘perspective-houses’ for the study of light, colour, and vision, but he also had ‘sound-houses’ and ‘perfume-houses’ without noticeable difference in endowments (Speeding et al. 1963: 13), following both classical and Renaissance arguments about the considerable effects of music on body and soul, he presented hearing as the most powerful sense in its operation upon human ‘manners’. What ‘men’ listened to had the power ‘to make them warlike’ or ‘to make them soft and effeminate’ or ‘to make them gentle and inclined to pity’. Such hidden powers in sound required penetration, and Bacon lifted up ‘visibles’ and ‘audibles’ together as central to his experimental programme. ‘The sight of the eye’, he concluded, ‘is like a crystal, or glass, or water; so is the ear a sinuous cave.’ Bacon never shied away from that labyrinthine complexity, and it is the sinuous cave of the ear, more than the crystalline glass of the eye, that stands as the better similitude for the modern sensorium’s twistings (Speeding et al. 1963).

‘The enquiry about sounds is worthy of philosophers’, Robert Boyle wrote in a letter in 1665, and his appraisal ended up widely shared among the learned. In 1684, when natural philosopher and churchman Narcissus Marsh outlined for both the Royal Society in London and its inchoate equivalent in Dublin a programme of research on acoustics, he started with a revealing ‘comparion ‘twixt the Senses of Seeing and Hearing as to their improvements’:

I mean, by shewing, that this lat [t] er of Hearing, is capable of all those improvements which the sense of Seeing has received from Art; besides many more advantages, that the Ear may enjoy, by the help of our Doctrine, above the Eye; all which moreover will be of as great benefit to mankind, as any thing that Opticks has yet discovered, if not of greater; which, with some other preeminences that it has upon another Score, will happily render Acousticks the nobler Science of the two.

Marsh dwelled especially on the technological potential in acoustic instrumentation, particularly ‘Microphones or ... Magnifying Ear Instruments’ for rendering ‘the most minute Sound in nature distinctly Audible, by Magnifying it to an inconcevable loudness’. Otacoustics, implements that could act as reliable hearing-aids for those in old age, Marsh thought were even more important than eye-spectacles, ‘faromuch as the Hearing of what’s spoken is of more daily use and concern to such men, th [a] n to be able to Read Books or to View Pictures’. A notably auditory hierarchy, Marsh’s — one that suggests clearly how the ear could rival the eye for experimental attention (Boyle 1966; Marsh 1685).

The learned enquiry into acoustics only accelerated in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A summary sense of the perceived revolution in the science of sound and its prominent place in the Enlightenment can be garnered from the Edinburgh Encyclopaedia (1832), an eighteen-volume landmark that had both British and American incarnations. Surveying the ‘exquisite refinements in modern mathematics’ and ‘the spirit of experimental philosophy, which has diffused itself over Europe since the time of Bacon’, the encyclopaedia lifted up the achievements in acoustics as one of the great fruits of these modern enquiries.
By the labours of these philosophers. Acoustics has been brought to a
state of great perfection. The science now presents a very different aspect
from what it exhibited in the time of the ancients. The properties by
which bodies act in producing sound, are now known; and their mode
of operation has, in general, been successfully investigated; - the laws
which sound obeys in its transmission to the organ of hearing, have been
reduced to the common principles of mechanics; - the essential differ-
ences between various sounds have been detected; and their mode of
action upon the ear pretty well understood: thus affording us a more
complete knowledge concerning sound, and the sense of hearing, than
we possess with respect to any other of our senses or their objects.

The fact that the Edinburgh Encyclopaedia was compiled by the
eminent Scottish natural philosopher David Brewster, who was renowned
for his work in optics and was hence never one to slight the eye, makes
this estimation all the more telling. Light was hardly an unrivalled
emblem of mastery and progress.

In at least one crucial way, the expanding inquiry into acoustics did
demonstrate the ocular biases of knowledge-making in the experimental
philosophy, for it was one of the central ambitions of early modern
students of acoustics to visualize sound. The very invisibility of sonorous
vibrations was recognized as an impediment to understanding them,
so the goal was to render them 'more sensible to the eye by a little artifice'
- namely, through observing the vibratory patterns reproduced in water,
sand, or flames of light. Already in the 1670s Robert Hooke conducted
acoustic experiments in which patterns of vibrations were displayed
through the use of flour, and by the end of the eighteenth century E.
F. F. Chladni had performed widely recognized demonstrations of
sound's motion through the changing patterns of sand on brass plating.
Arising with the Enlightenment was a new visual culture of sound, a
spectacle of the auditory, that became all the more marked on the
lecture circuit in the nineteenth century, with popular demonstrations
that featured a whole panoply of devices for showing off acoustic
principles. Also, with the growing anatomical attentiveness of the sev-
tenteenth and eighteenth centuries, the ear itself was increasingly visualized
through dissection as the body was broken down graphically into ever
more precise parts. The new experimental philosophy sought at a number
of levels to make sound intelligible by rendering it manifest to the eye. 11

It would be wrong simply to turn this visualizing impulse into further
evidence for the singular power of vision - that the ear was made intel-
ligible only on the eye's terms. Visualizing sound was indicative also
of the sensorial play of the natural philosophers, the concern with the
movement between and among the senses. For example, since sound
vibrations could be felt as well as seen, tactility was crucial to acoustic
study. The touch of vibrations provided, indeed, a peculiar corporeality
to the notion of 'sound bites'. As Galileo observed in his dialogues on
music, sound produces 'a Tittillation upon the Cartilage of the Temp-
aranum'; certain tones seem 'at one and the same Time to kiss and bite'.
Also with an expanding set of auditory technologies - from the speaking
trumpet in the 1670s to the stethoscope in the 1810s - sound was given
a new material culture, a hands-on tangibility that the phrase 'hearing
things' is intended to evoke alongside its psychological and illusory
notations (Galileo Galilei, Mathematical Discourse Concerning Two
New Sciences, excerpted in Lindsay 1973: 59).

The philosophical exchange among the senses was evident in another
endeavour of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: that is, the
effort to remake the spectrum of colours into a scale of music, a mathe-
matical system of correspondences between light and tone. Hence, the
play between sound and sight worked also in the other direction - as
in Newton's speculations on vibration theory in which he suggested
that 'vision is very conformable to the sense of hearing which is made
by like vibrations'. The model drawn from acoustic vibrations became
such a forceful analogy for how sensation worked that some Enlighten-
ment theorists, such as David Hartley and John Elliot, were ready to
incorporate all of sensory experience into an acoustic paradigm. 'Since
the discovery of the analogy between colours and sounds', Elliot
explained in his Philosophical Observations on the Senses of Vision and
Hearing in 1780, 'the various kinds of tastes and smells have been
considered as so many different tones or notes of these sensations'.
Under this model, even the very fragrances of a garden were joined to
musical experience. As Benjamin Rush, one of Hartley's American
disciples, explained: 'The rose and the pink resemble tenor; and the
jonquil, the minionet and the wall flower are striking analogies of the
softness and delicacy of treble tones. 12

The crucial counterpoint to the growing visualization of knowledge
among Enlightenment natural philosophers was the inductive concern
with the senses as a whole. The very sensationalism of the Lockean
epistemology ultimately made each of the senses the source of intense
study, vigilance, commentary, and pleasure. Take, for example, Edmund
Burke's 'erotic empiricism', in which all the senses were explored for
their powers to produce the sublime and the beautiful. Or take Etienne
Bonnet de Condillac's intent examination of all modes of sensation as
sources of knowledge, with primacy accorded to touch, part of what historian Elisabeth de Fontenay identifies as ‘a carnival of the senses’ in the French Enlightenment. Or even take Thomas Reid’s *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, the flagship of common-sense thought, a tome that grew out of a series of discourses presented before the Aberdeen Philosophical Society and dedicated to the discrete analysis of the senses. While there is little room for mistaking Reid as anything but a privilegister of the eye, he accorded such honour only after giving distinct scrutiny to smell, taste, hearing, and touch as well. In the nuances that the literati discovered through all their sensory comparisons, inspections, meditations, and delights, sight often ended up toppled from its lofty perch. This was evident, for example, in David Hartley’s observation in 1749 that ‘the ear is of much more importance to us, considered as spiritual beings, than the eye’. Benjamin Rush, sharing in Hartley’s view of the harmonies of Christianity and vibrational mechanisms, directly echoed this estimation of the ear’s spiritual supremacy in his lectures on the senses to his students in Philadelphia. This did not make Rush the patron of any one sense, however. Sometimes touch was on top, at other point’s vision or hearing, and all of them were the source of intense pleasure and unbridled possibility. ‘Our bodies may be compared to a violin: the senses are the strings’, and the fleshly concert that results are one of ‘nearly constant pleasure’, Rush told his pupils. What mattered most to this American *philosophie* was the cultivation and relishing of all the senses, the perfecting of their exercise through education: ‘The more acute and extensive we render the senses in their capacity of receiving impressions, the more we shall be able to increase our knowledge.’ As he told his medical students, ‘In a sick room, we should endeavour to be all touch, all taste, all smell, all eye, and all ear, in order that we may be all mind; for our minds, as I shall say presently, are the products of impressions upon our senses.’ Enlightenment understandings of the senses were inevitably much more fluid and sophisticated than any emphasis on vision’s hegemony suggests (Carlson, Wollock and Noel 1981).

None of this insistence on sensuous complexity is intended to make the Enlightenment ways of knowing seem innocent – that is, to put aside the substance of critical concerns over the objectifying gaze of manly autonomy or the watchful eye of state surveillance through an emphasis on a free play of sensual pleasures. Many of the counter-Enlightenment concerns about the detached imperiousness of the philosophical observer or the omnipresent, interiorized eye of modernity’s various wardens have their counterpart in similarly sinister modes of listening. Jeremy Bentham, for example, imagined a vast system of eavesdropping through speaking tubes as a crucial part of the panopticon, and Benjamin Rush illustrated how the sense of hearing works by alluding to the Ear of Dionysius, part of a legendary prison of antiquity in which ‘spiral windings’ were supposedly used to hear ‘the smallest whisper’ uttered by the inmates. In their cultivation of acoustics and their training of the ear, the literati also imagined a mastery of eavesdropping, an invasive mode of hearing that found embodiment in the desire to turn the new technologies of the auditory into tools of surveillance. *Walls have ears* – the saying was given new meaning during the Enlightenment.

One thing that all these acoustic ambitions make plain is that printing had plenty of company in the technological transformation of listening in the early modern world. Walter Ong imagined a long-term disincarnation of the voice – the body that makes the words – and connected that loss of presence, including the participatory encounter with divine speech, to the spread of typographical models of knowledge. Certainly, developments in communications had profound effects on the way the literati thought about the auditory qualities of revealed words. Illustrative is deist Tom Paine’s sharp deprecation of speaking as compared to printing: ‘A man’s voice can be heard but a few yards of distance; and his person can be but in one place... But the art of printing changes all the cases, and opens a scene as vast as the world. It gives to man a sort of divine attribute... He can be everywhere and at the same instant.’ Paine actually made this technological observation about simultaneity in the context of deriding Christ’s ‘pretended mission’, since Jesus had relied exclusively on verbal expressions in delivering his message: God’s *real* son, Paine suggested snidely, would have arrived with a command of printing. Finding all of Christian revelation a bundle of ‘hearsay upon hearsay’, Paine gave such unreliable voices all the less credit in comparison to the Promethean medium of print. On top of these word-of-mouth vulnerabilities, the mastered art of printing, Paine reasoned, only multiplied the instabilities of the scripture as text: ‘That book says (Genesis 1: 27), “So God created man in His own image”; but the printer can make it say, “So man created God in his own image.”’ To Paine, print was subversive of a speaking God, calling into question the value of an oral gospel and pointing up the contingencies of its textualization (Paine 1945: 1: 466, 505; 2: 786–7, 793).

Paine’s use of printing to discredit the auditory qualities of Christian revelation was embedded in a larger mechanistic critique of the oracular
voice. By the time Paine’s *Age of Reason* appeared in the 1790s, natural philosophers had long been trying to detach the voice from the presence of the speaker through a series of artificial mediations. Speaking trumpets, acoustic tubes, ventriloquism, voice-producing statues, and talking machines all suggested the disembodiment of the human voice, the transmission of sound from an absent, hidden, detached, or simulated speaker. Printing, in other words, had performative accompaniments in the disincarnation of spoken words, counterparts that have very much continued to thrive – from the mediated voices of the radio to computer simulations. (Today ‘electronic impersonators’ not only reproduce but also even generate a person’s voice, turning particular pieces of speech into a ‘voice font’ completely independent of the speaking body) (Andrew Pollack 1997: D1, D8). The growing fascination among natural philosophers with the ventriloquizing of human voices, with the machineries of reproduction and illusion, also fed their critique of the suspicious immateriality of heavenly voices. God’s voice, too, seemed increasingly hard to place: was not that voice an illusory presence as well? The sinuous cave of the ear beckoned philosophers into complex entanglements with the auditory, with hearing and voices, and those imbrications need to become a fuller part of historical narratives about modernity. There is so much more to the Enlightenment than meets the eye.

Notes

1. See Synnott (1991: 63–4; 1993: 128–155); Vinge (1975: 15–21); Smith (1997). In the Aristotelian corpus, the critical works for the ordering of the senses are *On the Soul* and *Sense and Sensibilia* — see Barnes (1984). For Christian interactions with these classical discourses, see Chidester (1992). Chidester points to a prevailing Christian preference for the eye over the ear, from Augustine to Bonaventure, though noting some auditory dissenters, including Meister Eckhart and then, predictably, Protestants such as Luther and Melanchthon. For other advocates of the minority position of elevating the ear over the eye, see Frangenenberg (1991) and Vinge (1975: 36–7, 58–9).

2. See Ellul (1985: 2); Martin Jay (1993: 45, 64, 69, 85); Locke (1975: 146). Jay’s care in qualifying these conclusions should be emphasized – as, for example, in his recognition of ‘the complexity of the modern scopic regime, both in theoretical and practical terms, even at its moment of apparent triumph in the Enlightenment’; but such qualifications are finally peripheral to his larger argument about ocularcentrism (p. 105). For additional samplings of this extensive literature on modern visuality, see Levin (1993); Crary (1990); Brennan and Jay (1996). For a strong, if rare, ‘auditory’ challenge to these visualist constructions, see Connor (1997: 203–23).


6. See Ong (1967: 9, 14, 64–73, 174). Ong laid the foundation for his larger history through his study of sixteenth-century Ramist logic in which diagrammatic, spatialized printed knowledge displaces dialogic ways of knowing. That Ramist reorientation of the intellectual world ends in ‘the elimination of sound and voice from man’s understanding of the intellectual world’ and in ‘the silences of a spatialized universe’. See also Ong (1958, 1977, 1982). Penelope Gouk has also recently underlined the shortcomings of Ong’s linear model of visualist ascendance – see Gouk (1999).

7. McLuhan, M. (1961, 1962). The historian who has done the most to give grounding and nuance to these mythic assessments of the print revolution is Elizabeth Eisenstein. For a summary volume of her research, see Eisenstein (1983).


10. Also available is the work of Constance Classen, although, unlike Corbin, she reiterates as much as complicates the ocularcentric narrative about the Enlightenment and modernity: ‘Modern Western culture is a culture of the eye’. See Classen (1998: 1).

References


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