

Introduction to a phenomenological approach to sound and listening

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Under the title Sound & Listening on the Edge of Music, Performance, Film and New Media a group of academic and artistic researchers were invited for a doctoral training course in May 2019. Our aim was to start discussing and thinking from practice rather than working with the traditional form of ex-cathedra lectures followed by a Q&A. This alternative approach of sharing thoughts and research included some phenomenological guidelines: practising phenomenology rather than thinking about it, allowing a thinking in movement aligned with a more conceptual thinking, approaching key concepts from a practical, intersubjective context rather than searching for definitions. In concreto each of the participants was invited to take part in a peer discussion in order to question his/her own research topic from a phenomenological perspective.

To start off the doctoral school I presented some quotes and key concepts as material to elaborate upon and as means to question a phenomenological approach to sound and listening in the group discussions. This text is an echo of this short presentation. It is a starting point to introduce various quotes, thoughts and key concepts I used in my own research towards a phenomenological approach to sound in film based on texts of Edmund Husserl, Dan Zahavi, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Claire Petitmengin, Shaun Gallagher and Roland Barthes.

A doctoral school starting from experience?

The unusual format of the doctoral school, with its accent on common experiences and group discussions, was the result of a previous 'reflective residency' with Dra. Leonie Persyn, Dra. Katharina Smets and Drs. Duncan Speakman in 2018, bringing academic research and research in the arts together. This reflective residency resulted from many discussions about the interaction of theoretical thinking and artistic practice. In my own research I always started from the experience of sound and listening and used phenomenology as a liberating theoretical framework. I was curious and somehow convinced that my own research could be expanded into other sound fields than that of cinema.

In the context of the reflective residency we decided not to talk or discuss without sharing a listening experience. The rules of our meeting were defined as such: every player had to present his/her personal artistic work or the artistic work at the basis of his/her research. Speakman invited us for a sound walk, Persyn proposed listening to some film fragments by Chantal Akerman and Smets presented parts of her radio work. To experience, together, before the stage of reflection, seemed a very inspiring method to advance in research. We were thinking together within the framework of our shared experiences and proposed keywords. Each participant concluded this intensive four-day-long meeting with a personal choice of keywords, put in a kind of mind map. It was Leonie Persyn who proposed to carry forward this method into the doctoral school *Sound & Listening on the Edge of Music, Performance, Film and New Media*.

A phenomenological approach to sound in film?

Phenomenology (founded by Edmund Husserl) differs from introspective psychology and also from objective knowledge. Phenomenology can be understood as a philosophical analysis of different types of world-disclosure. The phenomenological attitude gives the possibility to focus on the appearance of public objects in relation to the subjective side of consciousness. The subject is understood as an embodied, socially and culturally embedded being-in-the-world. (Zahavi 2015, 1-4)

In my own research I focused on sound as a dynamic audible movement, that is able to transmit an experience in film without attracting attention or asking the audience to reflect on the experienced sound. In classical film sound theories, e.g. Michel Chion's *Audio Vision* (1994), sound is defined as an 'added value', synchronised or not with the moving image. In film, however, sound reveals this dimension of audiovisual perception that is best suited for transferring experiences or for communicating an invisible world. Sound then is not only heard, but also felt (bodily). The challenge in my research was to develop a theoretical framework to understand and discuss about this bodily experience and creating the knowledge to evoke this experience in film, an intuitive knowledge that is very well elaborated in the art of sound recording, sound editing, sound design and sound mixing. A phenomenological approach, focusing on the phenomena and describing listening experiences, was a first step. The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty with its emphasis on the importance of the body in perception, a second step. But the revelation was the discovery of Husserl's different types of temporality and his insight of the kinaesthetic experience as motivation for the intentional act in which the intentional object is constituted.

Husserl operates with three different types of temporality: the objective time of the appearing object, the subjective time of the acts and experiences, and the pre-phenomenal absolute streaming of inner time-consciousness which he describes as a temporal process of a very special nature, different from a consciousness of time. The temporality of inner time-consciousness cannot be constituted but is experienced.

According to Husserl, our acts are tacitly self-aware, but they are also accessible to reflection. They can be reflected on and thereby brought to our attention. (...) Inner time-consciousness is simply another name for the pre-reflective self-awareness of our experiences, a streaming self-awareness that is not itself an intentional act, a temporal unit, or an immanent object, but an intrinsic and irrational feature of our consciousness. (Zahavi 2003, 88-91)

Based on these insights from Husserl and as an invitation to introduce a phenomenological approach in one's own research, I first highlight a few basic thoughts on phenomenology after which I operationalise

them within the context of sound in film:

- 1) Phenomenology starts with experience; perception is not simply a reception of information.
- 2) Phenomenology is an attitude in which we are interested in how things appear as correlates of our experience.
- 3) Phenomenology as a philosophical analysis of different types of givenness.
- 4) Our perception presupposes a particular type of bodily self-sensitivity: our experience of perceptual objects is accompanied by a co-functioning but unthematic experience of the position and movement of the body, called kinaesthetic experience.
- 5) The body at the centre of its listening is a situated body.
- 6) The world as the primordial unity of all our experiences.

Phenomenology starts with experience

The primordial role of experience is one of the crucial insights for choosing a phenomenological approach in research.

In phenomenology perception is not a simple reception of information, but it involves an interpretation which frequently changes according to the context. Phenomenology starts with experience rather than by what we expect to find, given our theoretical commitments. It asks us not to let pre-conceived theories form our experience, but to let our experience inform and guide our theories. In phenomenology we are interested in how the things appear as correlates of our experience. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 10- 25)

Applied to sound and listening, this quote invites us to reflect on the way we use words to describe sounds. Generally, we reveal our 'listening strategy'. I can listen to the source of a sound (I hear a dog barking) or to the meaning of a sound (the sound of the alarm clock means having to wake up). A musician can speak about the rhythm of the sounds of a city.

But emphasising the experience as a starting point asks for ‘open listening’, a listening without referring to the source or the meaning of a sound, or to the musical parameters of a sound. In terms of sound and listening, we have to admit that it is difficult to get rid of our “theoretical commitments and pre-conceived theories which try to define or distort our experience”. Furthermore, there is a lack of words to describe this ‘open listening’ as an experience, because we cannot capture it in a concept or in an image. In film the ‘felt sound’ plays a very important role. We all recognise how sound can bring us in a certain mood or distract our attention, without really specifically listening to that sound. How can we discuss this crucial filmic element without reducing its role in function of the image or the narration? How can we start with experience?

Phenomenology is a discipline, an attitude in which we are interested in how things appear as correlates of our experience

In phenomenology the subjective side of consciousness is crucial. What we see or hear is not the object in itself, but an appearance, a phenomenon revealed through our senses. Excluding listening to the source of the sound or trying to define the meaning of a sound brings us to the felt sound correlated to an embodied listening. We do not only listen with our ears, but also with our body. The listener with his/her body at the centre of his/her listening, listens from a first-person perspective, resonating with the sound, resonating with his/her life experience, bringing these resonances together in the experience of the sound.

Phenomenology as a philosophical analysis of different types of givenness

In *Phenomenology: The Basics* (2019), philosopher Dan Zahavi states that phenomenology can be seen as a philosophical analysis of different types of givenness.

Phenomenology is concerned with the way in which the object shows or displays itself, i.e., in how it appears. (...) it is possible for one and the same object to appear in a

variety of different ways: from this or that perspective, in strong or faint illumination, as perceived, imagined, wished for, feared, anticipated, or recollected. (Zahavi 2019, 1-45)

To understand this quote, it is necessary to realise that, in phenomenology, perceiving something is not a one-on-one activity, because the intentional object is constituted in the intentional act. Phenomenology makes a distinction between the appearance, the intentional act and the intentional object. Intentionality is the relation between consciousness and its object.

In the case of sound this means that a perception of sound is always correlated with a listening. The meaning or the source of the sound as an intentional object is 'constituted' in the intentional act. We can thus make use of different listening strategies, constituting different intentional objects.

Listening to a clip from *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou Le vent souffle où il veut [A Man Escaped]* (Robert Bresson, 1956) (34'12"-35'13") reveals how much is happening in one single moment. In the clip we see a person in jail (Fontaine) who is planning a way to escape. Bresson immediately invites us to listen together with the character from his first-person perspective. We cannot only hear what he hears but also the way he is hearing the presented sound. As an audience we are invited to move with Fontaine. But at the same time, we can focus on different aspects of the sound in this fragment: the gestures of the character, the sounds produced by the jailer in the corridor, the different spaces presented through sound, the position of the sounds in the different spaces and in relation with the character, the materiality revealed in the sound...

In short, the different listening strategies reveal different appearances and characteristics of the sound in this clip. The sound can evoke spaces as much as the listening mode of Fontaine.

Kinaesthetic experience

According to Edmund Husserl, the intentional act is motivated by a kinaesthetic experience, which is not yet reflectively constituted in origin:

(...) perception presupposes a particular type of bodily self-sensitivity. Our experience of perceptual objects are accompanied by a co-functioning but unthematic experience of the position and movement of the body, termed kinaesthetic experience. (...) This kinaesthetic experience amounts to a form of bodily self-awareness and, according to Husserl, it should not be considered as a mere accompanying phenomena. On the contrary, it is absolutely indispensable when it comes to the constitution of perceptual objects. (Zahavi 2003, 99)

I refer to Zahavi's reading of Husserl (*Husserl's Phenomenology* 2003, 98-110) to explore what this kinaesthetic experience might be. Zahavi starts from the fact that, for Husserl, an appearance is always an appearance of something (genitive) for someone (dative). In terms of an appearance in space this means that there is no pure point of view, but always an embodied point of view and that spatial objects can only appear for and be constituted by *embodied subjects*. Husserl argues that the body is a condition of the possibility for the perception of and interaction with spatial objects, and that every worldly experience is mediated and made possible by our embodiment. With this insight Husserl starts to examine bodily mobility and its contributions to the constitution of perceptual reality and calls attention to the role played by movement (movement of the eye, the touch of the hand, the step of the body, and so on) for our experience of space and spatial objects (Zahavi 2003, 99). This insight makes it possible to consider experienced sound in terms of a pre-reflective, non-thematic awareness of sound. In film it is clear that we have to distinguish a reflective, thematic awareness of sound, which leads to the perception of sound, and a pre-reflective, non-thematic awareness of sound, which resonates within the realm of experience. It is rare that we listen to the sonic environment attentively during a scene, but one sound can catch our attention and direct our gaze to something. Sometimes a 'sonic environment' puts us in the right mood to understand a filmic situation...

We can experience sound, without giving it a meaning or without searching for the source of the sound. The body of the listener then resonates, moves along with.

Philosopher Claire Petitmengin, specialised in neuro-phenomenology and more specific the pre-reflective experience, speaks about

a felt sound, experienced in an embodied listening from within. (Petitmengin e.a., 2009). For his part, French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes speaks of panic listening, as an open listening connected to the listening of a psycho-analyst in order to discover what is evoked by those aspects of sound that do not ‘mean’ anything (Barthes 223-229).

The body at the centre of its listening is a situated body

The body of the listener is always at the centre of his/her listening: “Were it to be modelled spatially, the auditory field would have to be conceived of as a ‘sphere’ within which I am positioned” (Ihde 75). In sound editing or *com-position* of sounds, this means that the body of the listener plays a role not only because of the bodily ‘position’ in space but also because of the situatedness of the listener’s body.

Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between positional spatiality, which is the spatiality of external objects, and spatial sensations and the situational spatiality. He explains the situational spatiality by means of the example of a primitive person in the desert who is always “immediately oriented without having to recall or calculate the distances travelled and the deviations since his departure. When the word ‘here’ applied to my body, it does not designate a determinate position in relation to other positions or in relation to external coordinates. It designates the installation of the first co-ordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, and the situation of the body confronted with its task” (Merleau-Ponty 102-103).

This quote has different consequences for sound and listening and especially for sound recording and sound editing. Sound has the possibility to transmit an experience without explaining what is happening. This means that, in terms of the transmission of an experience through sound, the unity of a situational space is not defined by a geometrical or objective ‘system’ imposed from outside (e.g. image), but by the transmitting of the situatedness of the listener in the sound recording, editing and mixing. This situatedness is

the anchoring of the active body in the sound. The sound then is an auditory dynamic movement, a time-object inviting the audience to bodily move along with.

The world as the primordial unity of all our experiences

The pre-reflective kinaesthetic experiences are characterised by a bodily intentionality, an intentionality that can be perceived as affective. The act of listening is then a passive activity. Merleau-Ponty describes passivity as “being encompassed, a situated being (...) that is constituted of us”, rather than as a causal action exerted upon us from outside (Merleau-Ponty 451). Merleau-Ponty describes this as a passive synthesis, that brings sensory experiences together into a single world (Merleau-Ponty 344). It is not the image that is at the centre of perception, but the body of the perceiver.

The senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter, they understand each other without having to pass through the idea (...) My body is the place or, rather, the very actuality of the phenomenon of expression (*Ausdruck*); in my body, visual and auditory experiences, for example, are pregnant with each other, and their expressive value grounds the pre-predicative unity of the perceived world, and, through this, its verbal expression (*Darstellung*) and intellectual signification (*Bedeutung*). My body is the common texture of all objects and is, at least with regard to the perceived world, the general instrument of my “understanding”. (Merleau-Ponty 244)

For Merleau-Ponty the world is the primordial unity of all our experiences, instead of a visible unfolding of constituting thought. Time then is ‘literally the sense of our life’, and only accessible to the one who is situated in it (Merleau-Ponty 454). Time is thus no longer a real process or an actual succession but arises from the relation to things: “We meant, in speaking of a passive synthesis, that the multiple is penetrated by us, and that, nevertheless, we are not the ones who perform the synthesis” (Merleau-Ponty 451).

Conclusion

In this article I aimed for an introduction to phenomenology in relation to research in the arts. Rather than explaining what phenomenology is, I presented phenomenology as an attitude that enables us to describe those elements that cannot be grasped in concepts. I highlighted a few basic thoughts on phenomenology that I used in my own research focusing on the invisible and touching aspects of sound. As a researcher, the phenomenological approach of sound and listening, nourished by insights of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, gave me the opportunity to describe the importance of the pre-reflective experience in the study of sound in film. The correlation between sound and listening, and the possibilities of different listening strategies became crucial in my methodology. Introducing insights such as kinaesthetic experience, the situated body at the centre of its listening and the passive synthesis, make it possible to start research from a resonance with and an intuitive comprehension of art. Theory and practice then are communicating vessels. There is no need to apply theory in practical actions leading to 'academic art' or to reduce art practice to theoretical concepts.

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