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Headphones, Fatigue

from: Head-hearing, Notes on Perception, 2009

The piece *Weiss/Weisslich 36: Kopfhörer* deals with the existence of different ways of noticing the world around us – with, of course, two ways in particular: with or without headphones.

With headphones, we are primarily *hearing*. Without headphones, we engage in more of a typical human mixture of hearing, seeing, smelling, thinking and talking, being hungry, having cold feet, and not wanting to forget our impending appointment or necessary errand. But the moment we put our headphones on, we are ears through and through: the world seems to want to reduce itself to a primarily acoustic phenomenon.

Headphones-on and headphones-off are thus two coexisting modes of understanding the world, or rediscovering ourselves in it. Depending on the chosen mode, the world becomes another world.

But the difference lies not just in the reduction to the acoustic; in fact, a simultaneous reevaluation of the acoustic takes place. All sounds and noises are suddenly equivalent in meaning. Events, near and far, can all at once gain the same presence or importance, linguistic and nonlinguistic noises interpenetrate each other such that it becomes difficult to concentrate solely on the messages they contain, and our mechanism for distinguishing between important and unimportant information, which is normally second nature to us, no longer works—as though we had unexpectedly slipped into a Buddhist-Cagean parallel universe ...

What, precisely, is happening here?

The membrane to the outer acoustic world—ordinarily the ear—is now ten centimeters higher than usual. The shape of the ear conch, which screens incoming signals for spatial localization, is replaced by a neutral omnidirectional microphone—or rather two microphones: one left, one right. Without the individual form of our outer ear, however, the differentiation between left and right may be preserved, but—as with a typical stereo sound—the difference between above and below is lost.

Moreover, the depth of space diminishes due to the limited quality of the microphones. Thus, hearing becomes flatter. But as with the seashell held to our ear, these limitations do not

lead us to hear less, but quite the contrary. It's like in photography: the same view, photographed, makes us aware of things we overlook in the actual presence of the subject.

This is all, by the way, in no way dependent on technological gadgetry. On occasion, we experience the same process without technology—right around the time when we get tired. Let us imagine the following situation: we have ridden the night train to a foreign city, barely closed our eyes on the train, and now sit, dead-tired in the early morning, in a crowded café, across from the person we were scheduled to meet. We try to concentrate on the conversation, but we find it difficult. All the chipper voices at the other tables are overly present, the chorus of mumbling and clinking of cups in the background thrust into our consciousness, making it practically impossible to keep up the conversation. Our own noise confronts us as exterior noise, and even our own voice, which we don't notice at all when we're well-rested, seems foreign.

This all goes to show: the usually functional focus on speech during a conversation is an achievement of the waking brain. And is only partially related to the configuration of the ear itself.

Conversely: the abrogated differentiation between "important" and "unimportant" signals in the fatigued brain, which makes every sound land homogeneously in our ears, allows us to experience something that can show us (as with prepared headphones) that hearing is in no way a *passive* sense, as common prejudice would dictate, but that we ultimately hear only that which we also create.

Translation: Meaghan Burke