



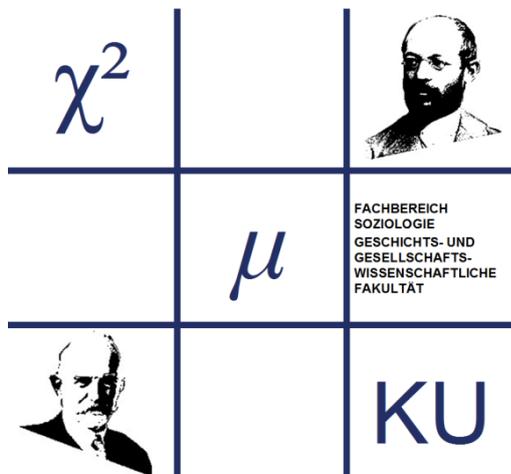
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Soundlapse: The Will to Know as a Matter of Concern

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Abstract:

As a very particular and largely marginal venture within “the Sociology of (scientific) Knowledge” Actor-Network-Theory has often been criticized for failing to properly conceptualize subjectivity. The Principle of Generalized Symmetry, it is often argued, inhibits a conception of the Subject as an active agent, involved in sense-making practices with which the “order of things” ceases to be a random collection of forces, but logically structured and understandable. At the same time, another perspective that touches upon issues related to the Sociology of Knowledge is that offered by Michel Foucault (1990). Until now however, Foucault has been predominantly invoked within the sociology of knowledge in relation to his conceptions of discourse and much less so in terms of his explorations of power and subjectivity. It is often thought that Foucault’s concept of the Subject does not invite close empirical analyses, as it is primarily the consequence of particular configurations of a historically and politically engendered dispositive.

In this paper, I wish to explore the critical issue of “the subject of knowledge” by engaging with a cross-reading between Foucault’s conception of “the Will to Know” and Latour’s conception of “Matter of Concern” as the initiation of the political, or better subjective, engagement with ordering life-worlds (what Berger and Luckmann (1966, pp. 65–109) described as “Institutionalization”). The Will to Know offers as a means to explore the threshold of “the Subjective”. It is the moment in which “the Subject” manifests itself as engaging in action. However, Foucault refrains from explicitly locating this Will inside the individual, even if in his later works on Sexuality his conception of ethics he sometimes seems to imply just that.

By contrast, Latour (e.g. 2005, 2013) does not invoke anything close to a conception of a “Will”, be it in terms of desire or intentionality. It seems that for his version of ANT, these are mere contingencies that can be subsumed under the more generic notions of “interessement” and “enrollment” (which were developed by his colleague, Michel Callon (1986)). To understand what

the threshold of “the Subjective” might be for Latour, one has to engage much more empirically with concrete issues of Interessement and Enrollment. Latour himself, however, has offered us a very useful tool to help us identify these: Matter of Concern. A Matter of Concern will always have to be explicated (and here Discourse Analysis certainly comes in handy) for it to become a focal point of raising interests and generating particular modes of engagement.

By emphasizing the nietzschean (post-structuralist) inspirations of both conceptions, it becomes possible to (a) enable a sociological engagement with Foucault that is better equipped to deal with heterogeneity and thereby more adept to support empirical research within the Sociology of Knowledge whilst (b) also de-polemicizing ANT and articulate more clearly its own contributions to enhance the relevance of the Sociology of Knowledge in relation to critical (and political) questions about collectivizing subjectivity.

Keywords:

Soundlapse, Silence, Will to know, Matter of concern, Simondon

Vignette 1: The concert venue – Between two songs

Ex-East Germany. A small concert venue downtown located in a disaffected train station. The project is a partial failure. Thought as a cultural centre, it never really took off and remained confined to some concerts and parties. The beer is cheap and the hall is smoker friendly. Tonight's show reaches its peak. It is somewhere past the middle of the band's set. It is hard to get the lyrics because of the screaming and the overall loudness caused by the two-man act; I guess I hear something about reaping off faces and masks. It is a peak of loudness, where sound embraces and overwhelms the audience, swinging back and forth rhythmically "en phase" with the guitar line and the slightly offbeat snare-kick groove. It is also peak of heat, moisture and darkness, where only the shadows of banging heads can be guessed, cut out from the canvas produced by the stage's spotlights. The sound is everywhere. The bass tones shake stomachs and the trebles drill eardrums. In this moment of extreme violence, no escape is possible. The sound is an intruder, which cannot be pushed back to the borders. No physical escape for the young boy caught in the front row. No psychological escape from the omniscient music destroying the possibility of abstraction. It seems that only now exists. Suddenly, the song ends, the last guitar chord is muted, the cymbals retained immobile in the drummer's hands. Silence. As overwhelming as the sound preceding it. However, as soon as it is felt, applause and whistles greet the ending and tears this silence apart. From this hubbub emerges the next song. A new beginning.

Vignette 2: 4'33''

August 29th 1952. Maverick Concert Hall in Hurley, New York. A young pianist sits down at the piano and starts to play his part. Which is: nothing. He closes the piano lid and does nothing for the following thirty or so seconds. First movement. Then, he opens the lid, close it again and waits, as it seems, for the next two minutes and forty seconds. He repeats the ritual one third and last time, for one minute and twenty seconds. In this piece from the American composer John Cage, silence is the only instrument played on stage. If numerous interpretations were given over the years, Cage's intention was clearly to challenge the concept of music-sound itself. During the representation, sounds were eventually produced, but not from the source where it "should have" come from. A woman coughing in the back row, the sound of shoes on the wooden floor. The rustle of clothes, of people moving, made uncomfortable by this unique piece. In short the noise of people living. This is the real music at the core of 4'33''. However, silence

¹ For a deeper insight in this first performance of 4'33'' see Kyle Gann (2010)

plays also another part. It suspends. It lies as the frame for noise and unveils as the canvas where reparation or new forms of order can happen and take form. It is the in-between, here aesthetised in a musical composition and where it ends begins something else, but still based on this moment of silence.

Vignette 3: A night of terror

Other venue, other country, November 13th, 2015. Outside the venue, the city is breathing its winter air, a Friday night spellbinding pulse with its cafés, traffic noise and streetlights. It seems to last forever, that the city never sleeps (although we know it does eventually, as Jacques Dutronc reminds us: “il est cinq heures, Paris s’éveille”). Then, a detonation resonates and jolts the city centre. It is coming from the venue. Between gunshots, the city has become a war zone. It interrupts everything, even the loud music of the Eagles of Death Metal. After a few hours and the intervention of the police force, the attack is over. A smog of terror invades the air. Silence, once again, interrupting the pulse of the city. Not a real, absolute silence, more like a hung over mutism. It does not last. Almost instantaneously, the screams, the cries, the sirens are resonating again, as if they found enough force to be loud again. As if the sense of hearing was slowly coming back after the shock of the attack. Those cries, a hesitating swarming to begin with will last for hours, days, they will spread out across the country and the world. National grief begins, psychological units are installed to help the victims, and the political leaders declare war and proclaim the state of emergency.

Please remain silent

Knowledge and Sound are usually not thought of together. It has been the great success of Literacy Culture (Ong, 2002), that meaning has become silent through writing and reading. Today knowledge is associated with databases, libraries and archives, and in most of these spaces one is ordered to remain silent. According to Foucault, that which lies silently beneath the production of knowledge is the Will to Know. It is widely assumed, that this Will to Know is the property of the Subject.

The Will to Know remains silent as the Subject withdraws itself from the scene of knowledge production. By contrast, communication is still by and large modelled on the notion of speech; the basic communicative act is above all a speech act (Austin, 1962) rather than an act of listening. Here too, however, sound is not considered to be central, when it appears – as for example

in the famous Shannon and Weaver (1998) model of communication – it tends to be a disruption, a deviation, a dysfunction: noise. Instead of the silent, transcendental Subject, we are confronted with the heteroglossia of subjectivities who – whilst producing a cacophony of noise referred to as “everyday life worlds” - distil for themselves “meanings” by the selective appropriation of symbols that are being shared. The cognitive processes of selecting and sharing, however, are being withdrawn from the noise and reconnected to the aforementioned silence of the Will to Know.

In this paper, we seek to provoke a debate about the materiality of knowledge, which we would like to associate – in a non-metaphorical way – with the materiality of sound. We would like to read Nietzsche’s Foucault against Kant’s Foucault so to speak, and engage with a Will to Know that is immanent rather than transcendent and does not work against the noise but with and through it. The key question we seek to address here is: To what extent can sound (as an extreme moment of violence) and its absence (which we will refer to as the soundlapse) lead to the reconstruction of the will to know as a matter of concern?

The three vignettes presented at the beginning will help us to understand this process of deconstruction and reconstruction/reparation of order through sound, each focusing on different aspects of the “subject of knowledge” as a matter of concern. In other words, what subjects the will to know is not some kind of mystical, divine power, be it God or Man, but sound itself.

An extreme moment of violence

The first question one ought to ask might be “why sound” particularly? In a similar way Jacques Attali (2012) argued in *Noise: the Political Economy of Music*, we see sound, noise as one of the central players in the shaping of the social. Noise is an intermediary present in any kind of association, any kind of encounter. Or even, vibrations are present in every encounters, sound being only the audible part, which physically resonates. However, unlike Attali, we argue that even silence has something to say about sound. Where he writes “Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise” (Attali, 2012, p. 1), we would answer that noise and its absence (silence) are equally essential even though they do have very different things to say. In other words, we see sound as a particular actor, just like the ones producing it or receiving it.

Sound is therefore to be studied in its materiality, as a physical event, which can lead to the social as it allows association or breaks them. We argue that a separation of both worlds only

leads to an imprisonment of sound in its production, its cause, losing on its way what it might do.

In this paper, we focus on particular sounds, which in their production/reception can be considered as extreme moments of violence. This extreme event is an almost pure *typtein* (van Loon, forthcoming), an impact of such a force that it breaks, bends, changes the one receiving it. It also means that there is no escape from it. It encloses, it demands, it destroys, it calls forth, it challenges, or even liberates.

Take a look at the first vignette. In this situation, the music is so loud that it englobes the whole venue. It penetrates bodies, it can even damage them. But music, or sound, is in this case not only what the human listener can hear. It is also what he can feel. Of course, the core of this music is grouped around the scope of frequencies audible by humans (from 40 Hz to 19 kHz) but even what comes below or beyond them (infrasounds and ultrasounds) are part of the situation. The sub frequencies are for instance something you feel in your guts (example of deaf people “hearing” bass frequencies). The kick drum or the bass guitar can produce those kind of frequencies and even if they are mostly cut in recordings (to avoid saturation of the final mix), they are still being produced on live performances. This is why the experience of a concert, a loud doom metal concert for instance, is something so complete that does not let anyone or anything escape. It does not leave any sonic “room” to rest. It is something exhausting as it repeatedly impacts on bodies with great violence.

The complete saturation of the soundscape exposes the violence of *typtein* as impact. It drives meaning – as *logos* – to the margins. “Meaningless noise” sets (human as well as nonhuman) bodies to work, it drives them, tempts them, motivates them, breaks them, reassembles them; in short: it actualizes them. The particles of the sound waves relentlessly attune all bodies into the machinic assemblage of the concert: they are “ordering” the event and without being centred on *logos*. Of course, this resembles nothing of Habermas’ ideal speech community, where people politely wait until it is their turn to speak (but who is listening?). The doom metal concert is all about listening and its sounds bypass the conventional hermeneutic circles and phenomenological cycles of understanding and knowing.

The terrorist attack is something else. It is sudden and exclusive. It is a fast breach in the “normal” whereas the concert is a development, something which lasts and evolves². It interrupts what was going on (even a concert) and immobilises what it could not move by its own force. Moreover, we see as well that sound is never only sound. An explosion is light, heat and dust. It drains and dries. It deafens, it burns and it kills. The imposing noise of heavy metal had been broken by an ever bigger explosion of particles. The typein of this terrorist attack was even more brutal, actual and demanding than the all-encompassing sound of doom metal. It was a totalizing typein of a different kind, a sudden actuality that defied any continuity or process. The machinally assembled bodies of the soundscape were suddenly disconnected and diffracted as the actuality froze to a standstill.

If both the attack and the concert vignette represent clearly the violence of sound, the 4’33’’ performance only presents guesses. It is the perfect answer to Attali because it is particularly because of silence that something significant can occur. It weighs. “Un silence de plomb”, a lead silence. “Un silence de mort”, a dead silence (Todesstille). This aesthetisation of sound shows that its absence has at least as much violent as its presence can have.

In all three examples, the sound appears in an extreme form that either gathers or destruct entities and associations. It enables, even produces continuity or interrupts it. But as we already argued, the violence of the phenomenon makes it impossible to escape. There is no runaway scenario. Stuck in the audience, you can’t ignore the music. You can’t ignore the gun shots and you cannot ignore the deafening silence.

In all three cases, we are confronted with the radical actuality of sound, even in its absence. We cannot but put sound at the centre; it is that which generates the Will to Know, but not because its subject is its transcendental owner that lies beneath, but because its subject buries it in an overbearing assemblage of materiality. One cannot hear oneself think. The thinking-subject of the modern episteme becomes the displaced listening-subject of the machinic assemblage. This is what presses home Heidegger’s conception of *Geworfenheit* as the abyss of *Dasein*’s disclosure. This is not the soft Logocentrism of the Beginning that was the Word and the Word that was God. This is an uncomfortable Big Bang that marks the impossibility of nothing.

² It is also very different from bombings in what we might call a “war zone” (let’s take the bombings of civilians in Syria for example). Whereas the terrorist attack leaves room for reparation (as we will argue afterwards), war bombings are erasing/stealing its possibility. They are not letting any room for silence as an explosion follows another in a more ongoing manner.

Erasing the virtual

“If you close your eyes, you lose the power of abstraction” (Serres, 1975, p. ???)

This totality of sound, this extreme moment of violence and what it means can be understood through the lens of the virtual. Rob Shields (2003) sees the virtual as something ideally real, distinct from the concrete (actually real), the abstract (possible ideal) and the probable (actual possibility). Arguing that even the possible is real, the two-by-two matrix becomes a process between the virtual and the actual only, abstractions becoming therefore part of the virtual, which means ideally real.

Shields himself lamented the disappearance of the impossible, but for a monistic take on the question of being, to treat these as horizons beyond which one can think without ever reaching it, is very attractive. Real/Ideal Virtual/Actual or Abstract/Concrete are no longer qualitative categories, but intensities. The intensity of the virtual is the multiplication of optionality. The real-ideal of the virtual is different from the concrete reality of the actual as that is the stipulation of an event, an actual occasion, a *typtein*. The virtual invokes *legein*, the gathering of voices, of meanings, of associations.

Listening to music, the mind wanders around. One can listen to a certain song and remember when one first heard it, remember in which conditions one heard it. One can listen to another song and wonder about what happened in one’s surroundings, or about anything else. But when the music becomes violence, when the concert is so loud one’s entire body is shaking, the possibility for abstraction is being drastically reduced, if not completely erased. The sound is always “pulling one back” in the pit with the other listeners. It englobes on such a level that there is no remembering, no wondering, no virtual. There is only the actual, the experience, and the taking place.

Sound takes place; a soundscape is always an actually occurring “taking place”. Every *typtein* stamps it actuality onto the bodies assembled as the soundscape. Even in the case of the terrorist attack, surviving takes the upper part, instinct, reflexes, fear and despair more than reason or ideas are leading bodies. Once again, there is no room for the virtual; there is no place for contemplation or reflection. Action has been overtaken.

The sociological focus on knowledge seems hopelessly inept to deal with actual taking place, but this is only because it has been looking for the silent force beneath: the Subject of the Will to

Know. The Will to Know, however, is itself not silent; it bangs the drum like monkeys do. That this sociological ineptitude might have something to do with its blatant and premature rejection of the simulacrum (e.g. the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave), is an assertion that cannot be dealt with in this paper, but needs to be seen as a source of inspiration behind our monistic convictions.

Noise, as the saturation of the actual, as the radical accomplishment of *typtein* without *legein*, stands not in opposition to Knowledge, but is its berthing place. 4'33'' works again quite differently. The absence of music encloses the audience in the role of the musician. They are the ones making sounds, which will eventually "disturb" the absolute silence. The actuality resides in those sounds of bodies and clothes and this is the only thing there is to hear. This is not a composition in the classical sense, notes, tone were not written down beforehand, and they were not thought through music theory. It is a *musique concrète*, a performance limited to its actuality.

However here too, noise reveals the Will to Know as itself a Matter of Concern. This time, however, the submission of the Will to Know to sound leaves the actualities a lot more space. The thus constructed "begging for content" enables us to see, perhaps, how a monism-averse sociology of knowledge might have sought to deploy "social explanations" to fill the silence. The silence becomes the subject of thought rather than of listening. This subject of thought, however, is also a subject of distraction, of evasion, of withdrawal. It is not engaged with the sound, but seeks to escape it. However, in so doing, it is not mastering meaning; it is not creating a will to know, but "merely" unfolding as its effect.

Silence – the Soundlapse

As described in the vignettes, silence always follows the violence of total actuality. It can be a few seconds, it can last for minutes, sometimes exactly four minutes and thirty three seconds. But it can also last for hours.

This silence, which we call soundlapse³ is, like the sound before it, never "only" silence. In the soundlapse, the sound before silence is included with it as this silence is constructed upon it.

³ Analog to timelapse, the soundlapse is a momentary absence of sound. It can be considered as the interval of time between two "events" but also carries something of a fall, a temporary failure, and an interruption of order or even the termination of rights.

This is the absorption of the impact. It is the deepening of the resonance caused by the impact/vibration. Or even more precise, it is the recording, the incorporation of the energy delivered by the impact before it can be released again and resonate (next part on resonance), which means that soundlapse therefore includes sounds after the silence.

This silence is the sound of “pure” actuality before the virtual is being released again. It is the sound of reparation (or gathering) of order before it actually happens. In terms of the social, it is an emptied milieu where information was not delivered yet. This milieu is where collectives will be built again. It is the milieu of new stages of collective individuation but where the information making this individuation actually possible was not produced and shared (Simondon, 2005). But because silence is not mere silence (charged with the energy of impact), it carries experience and knowledge in a form that is not usable yet. It is where a new order can be established, but not as a simple reboot, it has gained the experience of what happened just before.

But for Simondon, individuation is a transfer of energy, or information. It is an actualisation (from the virtual to the actual). Therefore, for a process of individuation to take place, the virtual must be present to be even actualised. The energy must be accumulated and made available, the information must be made understandable. Silence will last as long as this energy does not find any catalysator, as long as the information is not being translated into new sounds, in other words, as long as the resonance does not happen.

This leads to the main question: how can this information transit again, how can the process of individuation take place? In other words, after this extreme moment of violence, how can order be established again?

To answer these questions, a parallel reading of Michel Foucault and ANT must be attempted to see how information as knowledge can lead to the formation of new networks. The Will to Know that stems from sound, becomes itself a matter of concern in silence. Sound as a matter of concern always-already points towards the process of individuation, which is the bounding/binding (or taking-place) of matter-energy-information flows (Van Loon, 2014).

Sound as the threshold of the subjective emerges first as a mode of problematization. All three vignettes have made this abundantly clear. This is what the soundlapse reveals: a threshold between the actual and the virtual, a moment of individuation that might be experienced as “the will to know”; i.e. what was formerly known as “the Subjective”. For example in Vignette 2, the problematization of “what is happening?” became a moment of terror as one actuality (that of

the noise of a heavy metal concert) was violently interrupted by another the firing of guns that worked like an explosion, a big bang of a new world order inaugurated by a terrorist attack.

The big bang that interrupted the noise of Eagles of Death Metal is the threshold of the Subjective in the sense of “knowing” what is happening and above all how to act? However, ANT demands that we perceive this not as a phenomenological encounter in which all is revealed at once (by going through the complete phenomenological cycle in the instantaneous speed of the “time out²), but as a process of investigation, of forensic science if you will. And this process unfolds “on the way” because the actual has enabled the re-emergence of the virtual.

To understand what the threshold of “the Subjective” might be for ANT, one has to engage much more empirically with concrete issues of secondly Interessement, thirdly Enrollment and fourthly Mobilization. What interests are at stake at the threshold of the subjective in Vignette 1? A song ends, a short soundlapse, the noise of the public’s response. Perhaps one could understand the noise as a repayment for the noise that was the gift of the doom metal band. Here we would enter the world of Mauss and its insistence on reciprocity as both a moral and strategic concern for the continuity of association. Perhaps the audience wants the band to continue its concert, to encourage it to keep on giving, in the same way as that during conversations, listeners often give cues to speakers to encourage them to continue, as revealed by Conversation Analysis. However, we can safely assume that interests are at stake and these interest perform a bonding between band and audience.

Latour himself, however, has offered us a very useful tool to help us identify these: Matter of Concern. Concern refers to interest. It is that which is the actualization of Geworfenheit. Matter is not accidental here as it matters, not in the sense of a hylomorphic understanding of “qualified substance”, but as a flow, a force at work in its unfolding. It is a bounding fore (as interests are exclusive and intolerant) and a binding force, as interests are prehensions. Sound prehends actuality and the soundlapse prehends virtuality, opening the door to a multiplicity of individuations that might flow from there. Indeed, it is the soundlapse that is the threshold of subjectification; it is that which enables a subject to act.

As tied to actual interests, Matters of Concern will always have to be explicated. This is what Discourse Analysis is often deployed for. Discourses might relate very concretely to the articulation of particular interests but also to the calibration of secondary experiences (e.g. Dewey on Experience and Nature). At any rate, what discourses enable is the formatting of particular modes of engagement or “roles”. Whereas for the sociologists of social explanations, this en-

rolment is a process of socialization: one learns to play certain roles by internalizing its norms and values, a monistic sociology cannot play around with arbitrarily separated interiorities and exteriorities. Instead, it has to stay radically empirical and focus only on surfaces (Deleuze, 1994). At the surface we can only see the formation of patterns through repetitions, and in the case of enrollment these are primarily imitations.

What is there to be internalized at the threshold of a soundlapse? There are only prehensions of sound and silence, forces that move us or irritate us, that enable the articulation of interests and invite imitations (e.g. role playing). By articulating interests and roles, entities are being bound to assemblages, whilst at the same time being enabled to act; that is, they are mobilized to perform the collective work or an actor-net-work.

Sounding again - The Will to Know as a Matter of Concern

Understanding the individuating materiality of sound, we are now able to link Foucault's Will to Know and Latour's Matter of Concern. It enables us to avoid the question "Where does power lie?" in relation to the threshold of subjectivity, and instead focus on flows of individuation as actualization and virtualization, as transfers of energy, information and matter that might impose themselves or unleash a multiplicity of actions.

Agencies of domination are, as Foucault argued in his *History of Sexuality* (1990), lying in the one listening and telling nothing rather than where sound is actually being produced. It is the example of the priest listening during the confession and saying nothing (Sterne, 2012). This is why 4'33'' is also so strange and powerful. John Cage took away the agency from the audience who are powerful listeners putting the musicians and composers at stake⁴. However, in 4'33'', there is nothing to listen to, nothing to impose your silent judgment upon. There is only the possibility of becoming the one producing sound. The silent one is the pianist, or even John Cage, catching off-balance the audience that is not able to fulfil the only role it has.

⁴ Those agencies are not only visible in the audience listening but also in the audience which does not want to listen anymore. Both confirmation (through applause for instance) or refusal (discontent whistles and booing) have the power even to mute the concert. It is for instance what happened on 2nd December 1954 when Edgard Varèse presented his new piece *Déserts*. The piece composed for orchestra and electronic tape led the audience to chaos, people talking, shouting, laughing in a manner that music could sometimes not be heard anymore (official recording of the concert available on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ihrJ2-8xao).

Power can also emerge from the silence that has been maintained artificially, by means of imposition. It is the national mourning after the Paris attack where solidarity, but also patriotism, innocence, condemnation of terrorism are for instance what appear in those few minutes. It is invisible when held. But if someone interrupts it, or refuses to remain silent, it is a proof of culpability. Silence is consent, breaking it off is insulting the Republic, insulting France and therefore insulting freedom (example of pupils refusing the minute of silence after the Charlie Hebdo attack).

By emphasizing the nietzschean (post-structuralist) inspirations of both conceptions, it becomes possible to (a) enable a sociological engagement with Foucault that is better equipped to deal with heterogeneity and thereby more adept to support empirical research within the Sociology of Knowledge whilst (b) also de-polemicizing ANT and articulate more clearly its own contributions to enhance the relevance of the Sociology of Knowledge in relation to critical (and political) questions about collectivizing subjectivity.

Treating Simondon as brokering a memorandum of understanding between Foucault and Latour, we were forced to shift attention away from the philosophical underpinnings of notions of knowing and acting, and instead focus on sound and in particular the soundlapse. It is time that both conceptions of “technique” and “discourse” become firmly rooted in a non-metaphorical and radically empirical notion of experience in relation to sound (including noise and silence), rather than vision, not to replace the latter, but to ensure that we prioritize prehension rather than perception.

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