Research Article

Jiří Zelenka*

Hearing and Listening in the Context of Passivity and Activity

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to demonstrate the phenomenologically grounded dynamics of hearing and listening as a possible approach to our sonic experience. Its starting point is the studies of contemporary urban spaces devoted to their sonic experience. The results of these studies and their interpretation will serve as a starting point for the introduction of dynamics of hearing and listening. In the next part of this article, I will focus on the elaboration of this relationship with regard to the critique of Husserl's concept of activity and passivity in his late work *Experience and Judgment* and Merleau-Ponty's concept of being-in-the-world. Based on this, in the end, certain common features will be shown, connecting the thematization of activity and passivity with the relationship of hearing and listening.

Keywords: sonic thinking, sonic phenomenology, urban soundscape, experience, urban space

1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the phenomenologically grounded dynamics of hearing and listening as a possible approach to our sonic experience. The starting point for the introduction of this dynamic will be the study of sonic experience in urban spaces. Based on this study, I will try to develop the dynamics of hearing and listening in the context of Husserl's conception of activity and passivity and Merleau-Ponty's being-in-the-world. This will lead to a clearer shape of the whole dynamics of hearing and listening.

The basis of my approach is phenomenological. That is why I want to be guided by our experience and why I chose the studies of contemporary urban spaces dealing with various forms of sonic experience. This is also the reason why I chose as a starting point to explore contemporary urban spaces such as a supermarket. Similar spaces are an integral part of the contemporary urban landscape and its soundscape.[1] Soundscape, like landscape, is not a constant, but has its own evolution throughout history. The soundscape of a man living in the medieval countryside is different from the soundscape of a man living in today's big city. The soundscape of modern cities is most characterized by noise, which is ubiquitous and from which there is no escape. Noise is the most common cause of complaint for New Yorkers. One-sixth New Yorkers even suffer from hearing loss due to noise.[2] This phenomenon of sound pollution, which is typical of today's cities, can be the reason for similar approaches to sonic thinking, as we can find in Murray Schaefer's book *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Here we also find a

1 Soundscape refers to any sound environment. It can be a real environment, as well as an abstract construction such as a musical composition. (Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 274).
2 Rodriguez-Lopez, "Ambient Noise Disruption in New York City," 1–3.

* **Corresponding author: Jiří Zelenka,** Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic, e-mail: jiricek.z@gmail.com

comparison of pre-industrial and post-industrial soundscape on the basis of which the transformation of our sound environment is illustrated. My approach to the sonic problematic is different. Rather than comparing individual historical soundscapes, I focus on a phenomenological approach to our current sound environment, which is a familiar part of our everyday world. Such a space is the space of the supermarket.

Supermarkets and later hypermarkets are a relatively new part of our urban landscape. In less than a hundred years, however, they have become places without which we can hardly imagine our lives. The basic difference between a supermarket and a traditional grocery store is the size of the space that the supermarket occupies. Thanks to this, we often find supermarkets on the outskirts of cities, where land prices are cheaper and there is more space for parking. The same characteristics then apply to the hypermarket. According to Baudrillard, "the hypermarket cannot be separated from the highways that surround and feed it, from the parking lots blanketed in automobiles, from the computer terminal-further still, in concentric circles-from the whole town as a total functional screen of activities."[3] A specific soundscape is therefore also associated with these spaces. As we approach the supermarket from a distance, we are greeted by the sounds of ubiquitous cars. Car honking symbolizing the fight for the best parking space. The moment we enter the store building the soundscape will change. The sounds of traffic from outside are slowly falling into the background of our perception. Instead, our perception is dominated by the sounds of human movement and fragments of conversations, the beeps of cell phones and electronic devices, an impersonal voice emanating from a speaker that announces bargains etc. Somewhere in the background of all these sounds, there is also music playing in the supermarket.

The soundscape of the supermarket consists of two parts. The first is variable and depends on the presence of people. The second, on the other hand, is constant and its character is that it is part of the design of the whole space. A supermarket is a functional space, the essence of which is to make a profit. This affects the design of the entire space, including its soundscape. Therefore, the music that plays in the supermarket also serves as a means to increase sales. We can find studies that deal with the relationship between the volume of music playing in a hypermarket and the pace of in-store traffic flow of a shopper or the effect on the daily volume of goods sold.[4] Another study examines the influence of music played in a store on wine selection.[5] According to the results of this study, the music that plays in the wine department can influence the customer's choice. The results of these studies are interesting not only in terms of marketing purposes. The first study also looked at how people perceived music playing in the background while shopping. The conclusion of this study is: "subjects were something less than totally conscious of the music while shopping, but it cannot be said that they were completely unaware of it. Rather, the music may have been in the background of the shoppers' perceptual fields. Nothing definite, however, can be stated about the customer's exact level of music awareness while shopping."[6] It is the result of this study that leads us to the dynamics of hearing and listening.

2 Hearing and listening

As we can see from the results of the studies presented above, their results are linked by a certain ambiguity. This ambiguity lies in the fact that the results of none of the above-mentioned studies give a clear answer in the context of sonic perception of space. On the contrary, what these results show us is the variability of sonic perception of space. I want to interpret this ambiguity by introducing the phenomenologically motivated dynamics of hearing and listening as a possible description of our sonic experience.

3 Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 76.

4 Milliman, "Using Background Music to Affect the Behavior of Supermarket Shoppers," 86–91.

5 North et al., "In-Store Music Affects Product Choice," 132.

6 Milliman, "Using Background Music to Affect the Behavior of Supermarket Shoppers," 86–91.

Hearing denotes here the physiological potential of our body, while listening refers to the phenomenality of the experienced world. Hearing is one of our bodily senses, that is, it is conditioned by the specific structure of our embodiment. In order to listen, we must first be able to hear. This is also the reason why we work with the hearing and listening relationship as a dynamic relationship. Hearing and listening are not in opposition here. On the contrary, their dynamic relationship is a chance to describe the richness of our sonic experience, as we will show in the next part of the work.

Returning to the results of the studies I presented above, the question now arises as to how their ambiguous results relate to our hearing and listening dynamics. In other words, is it enough for the interpretation of them to remain within the physiologically conceived hearing? We already encounter complications here. What actually happens when we hear? Each sound has a specific pitch, timbre and amplitude that is measurable in decibels. Sound also has its location in a three-dimensional space. However, all these "objective" parameters do not mean that we all hear the same. Their processing in our auditory system differs, with the result that each individual hears in a specific way, even though they are objectively hearing the same sounds, even when two people have the same threshold auditory acuity. Based on this, we can observe differences in hearing in men and women, which implies that even on the level of hearing we can already find some differences.[7] Are these differences sufficient to interpret the different perceptions of background music in the supermarket? I don't think so. Therefore, I propose the following interpretation. The supermarket customers who were the subject of the study did not differ only in their ability to hear. They also differed in how they listened to space. This thesis is also supported by the results of another study, which examined how the modification of the soundscape in the hypermarket, which was caused by playing the sounds of nature, affected customers. One of the interesting results of this study is the change in the perception of sound during the so-called "listening walks." "A listening walk refers to an act of walking and listening to the environmental sounds and paying attention to the thoughts they evoke."[8] In other words, listening walk is a specific way of attentively listening to our current environment, and thus revealing listening as a relationship to the world.[9]

Listening is a relationship to the world. Listening creates my specific world. On the other hand, my world always influences the way I listen to it. In this context, it can be argued that listening depends more on culture than on the biology of my hearing.[10] Listening always has a subjective component. My every encounter with sound is always temporary.[11] The sounds I hear change as I walk through the city streets. I can immerse myself in the sounds of the street, just as I can isolate them by putting on headphones with noise cancelation mode and cutting myself off from street noise in a single moment. In this sense, listening is a production of my (sonic) world. As Salome Voegelin puts it: "Listening produces a sonic life-world that we inhabit, with or against our will, generating its complex unity. Sound involves me closely in what I see; it pulls the seen towards me as it grasps me by my ears. Sound renders the object dynamic. It makes it 'tremble with life' and gives it a sense of process rather than a mute stability." [12] However, this doesn't mean that this production of my sonic world, which takes place predominantly in listening, takes place without the participation of hearing. Although listening takes into account the subjective nature of relating to the world more strongly than hearing, because we find different cultural and personal contexts in it, it should be seen that if we talk about the production of my sonic world, it includes the whole dynamics of hearing and listening. In other words, we need the whole dynamic of hearing and listening to capture the complex nature of our sonic experience.

Only in this perspective of the complex dynamics of hearing and listening can we finally find an adequate interpretation of the results of the mentioned studies. Hand in hand with this, the legitimacy

7 Sax, "Sex Differences in Hearing Implications for Best Practice in the Classroom," 13–21.

8 Kontukoski, "Nature Sounds in a Hypermarket. A Case Study on the Modified Soundscape of Commercial Spaces in Finland," 101.

9 "Listening walk" seems to be equivalent to "Soundwalk," See for example Westerkamp (1974).

10 Blesser, *Spaces Speak, 3.*

11 Ihde, *Listening and Voice,* 57.

12 Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 11.

of the phenomenological approach to sonic thinking is also shown to us here. With the complex nature of listening in mind, soundscape becomes problematic. Here again, echoes of questions of objectivity and subjectivity and their transcendence are heard. If listening is an active, original and temporary production of our perception, we must consider the possibility of an unlimited number of possible soundscapes. This does not mean that we are heading for solipsism. The soundscapes of our world are shared and intersubjective, but they are not identical. We can immerse ourselves in one specific sound at any given time and thus enrich our perspective and our own world. This topicality of attentive listening has its specific place in my position towards the world. Its place is not the "stream of pure consciousness" or Kant's "object itself." Its place is the pulsating and vivid presence of the current moment.

The character of listening is the variability with which I listen to the world. It grows out of the physiological nature of hearing, as we presented it in the previous part of the work. This variability can lead to different "modes" of listening. Pierre Schaeffer in his book *Treatise on Musical Objects* distinguishes between ordinary and specialized or expert listening.[13] Michel Chion in his work *Sound: An Acouological Treatise* shows other possible approaches to the analysis of listening, which can be oriented either on the basis of the listener's relationship to the sound source as in the case of identified and unidentified listening,[14] or on the basis of the relationship of representation that opens between the sound and the listener as in the case of figurative and causal listening.[15] All these approaches to listening reflect the richness and variability of this phenomenon.

In the previous part of my work, I presented the dynamics of hearing and listening as a phenomenologically grounded description of our sonic experience. Based on several studies that have examined various forms of sound perception in urban spaces, it has been shown to us that the sonic experience of our surroundings has great variability. In other words, it was shown to us how big the differences are in how we listen to our surroundings. In the following part of my work, I will try to check the validity of the dynamics of hearing and listening. And because we still want to stay on the phenomenological ground, we must turn our attention back to our experience. Husserl's analysis of activity and passivity from his work *Experience and Judgment* should help us with this.

3 Activity and passivity

In Husserl's analyses of perception, the visual component of experience plays a primacy. Husserl himself mentions in his lectures *Ding und Raum* that even in the case of the constitution of space, visual and tactile perceptions play a more important role than sound perceptions.[16] Therefore, the analysis of passivity and activity in *Experience and Judgment* aims at the analysis of visual experience. However, I believe that this is not a reason not to pay attention to this analysis even when the focus is on the sonic experience.

Husserl's analysis of passivity and activity seeks to capture the integrity of our perception. In this context, activity is always what grows out of passivity. In other words, passivity precedes the activity that always follows it during experience. The whole of perception always takes place as the unity of the time-consciousness. We can see the difference between activity and passivity as we move in the realm of our natural experience. Activity in this context refers to self-activity, acts of judging or deciding on one of the possibilities etc. However, in order to have this activity of self-choice, we always need some background as its source. This source is then nothing but the sphere of passivity.

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13 "In the same way we could contrast ordinary and specialized listening – not simply in order to complete the pair natural-cultural (in sectors 1 and 4) with another (in sectors 2 and 3) but to illustrate the difference in listening skill, quality of attention, and the confusion of intentions in ordinary listening, whereas specialized listening deliberately chooses from the mass of things to be listened to only what it wants to hear and elucidate." (Schaeffer, *Treatise,* 87).

14 Chion, *Acouological Treatise*, 112–3.

15 Ibid., 115.

16 See Nitsche, "Sonic Environments as Systems of Places."

Although we cannot yet speak of intentional ego-acts in the sphere of passivity, this does not mean, according to Husserl, that passivity is a chaotic mess of disordered data. The character of the passive field is its pregivenness (*vorgebenheit*). We do not yet find things as objects in this field, but this does not mean that there is no structure in the passive sphere of pregivenness. Already in this field we can contrast certain nuances. Husserl demonstrates this characteristic on the example of a visual field in which individual colour shades create contrast and nuances, which in turn means that this field does not appear to be completely homogeneous. These nuances then lead to what Husserl calls "apperceptive differences" in a given sensory field.[17] At this point, we do not yet associate these differences with objects, but we can still perceive them as different precisely because of their mutual difference in a given sensory field. Importantly, already here, in the sphere of passive pregivenness, we can find certain constitutive and synthetic performances. Only thanks to them can we have these contrasting identities in the passive sphere of perception. These synthetic performances are possible only in connection with the course of internal time-consciousness.

This analysis of the passive sphere showed us the character of the passive structure. The character of the passive structure can be described as a contrasting identity. Even though we cannot talk about "objects" or "things" at this point, we can already find some synthetic performances in the passive sphere. So the important thing that the analysis of passivity and activity has shown us is the presence of constitutional and synthetic performances here in the passive sphere.

Now we can ask the question, what synthetic performances are in play in the sphere of passivity? According to Husserl, these synthetic performances are association syntheses. Association syntheses are a condition for the passive active dynamics of perception to take place within the unity of perception.[18] Association according to Husserl is meant here exclusively as the purely immanent connection of "this recalls that."[19] Without these association syntheses, this ongoing dynamics of passivity and activity would not be possible. Association syntheses play a key role in passivity and activity. Although they begin in the sphere of passivity, they also carry a certain affective potential towards the ego. That is, they represent a potential for passive–active transformation. Without this affective potential, there would be no possibility of a connection between the passive realm of pregivenness and the active performances of the ego. This affective potential appears to be a break in the homogeneity of the field of perception. We can illustrate this with the example of a high tone that emerges from our sensory field and attracts our attention.

Thanks to this affective power, which contrasts certain parts of our perceptual field, we now see the possibility of ego activity. In order for the ego to become active, it must first be affected by something. This is only possible if passive association syntheses are performed. These are key to all possibilities of heterogeneity and homogeneity of the perceptual field. Together with the syntheses of internal time-consciousness, they constitute the form of our perception as we experience it. In this sense, we are beginning to see the key role of affective power in relation to the course of passive–active dynamics. This affective power represents a kind of bridge between passivity and activity. To better understand its form, we can turn to its intentional analysis. In this sense, affection represents the relationship between the impulse rising from the passive sphere of perception and the ego on the other hand. The strength of the affection then also depends on the intensity and distance. On the example of the high tone that attracts our attention, we see what we mean by intensity here. Similarly, the distance between the affecting "object" and the ego plays a role in relation to the affective force that prevails here.

We now come to the key moment of analysis, which is the moment of turning towards (Zuwendung) of the ego. This moment of turning towards of the ego occurs when the ego responds to the affective power that is directed at it and turns to the "object" that affirms it. In other words, turning towards of the ego means here the focus of attention of the ego. The significance of this event is twofold. First, it is here that the

17 Husserl, *Experience and Judgment,* 73.

18 "It is the phenomenon of associative genesis which dominates this sphere of passive pregivenness, established on the basis of syntheses of internal time-consciousness." (Husserl, *Experience and Judgment,* 76).

19 Husserl, *Experience and Judgment,* 75.

transition to the active sphere takes place. Related to this, secondly, is that the moment of Zuwendung also represents the transformation of the whole intentional field. The intentional object to which the ego has turned its attention now stands in the centre, while the rest of the field of perception falls into the background. Husserl calls this newly formed intentional relationship as attention of the ego (Aufmerksamkeit des Ich). This attention of the ego then describes the intentional transformation of perception at the moment of "awakening" the ego.[20] We now have before our eyes an active and receptive ego, whose attention is tied to some intentional object that stands in the centre of its perceptual field. The active and awakened ego can now "perform" all higher-order intentional outputs like, for example, acts of judgment or predication.

Now that we have looked at the demonstrated structure of the passive–active dynamics of our perception, we need to keep a few things in mind. First, this analysis is intended to be a phenomenological analysis of our experience. When we get to the critique of this analysis from the point of view of sonic thinking in the following part of the work, one of the points of this critique will be the plausibility of this analysis in relation to the nature of our experience. The second point we want to mention here is related to the question of intentional intensity. When looking at Husserl's analysis of passivity and activity, we must keep in mind that this passive–active dynamics is not linear in the sense that once there is a transition from the passive to the active sphere, and thus the awakening of the active ego, there is no going back. Of course, this is not the case here. The nature of passive–active dynamics is far more a kind of constant fluctuation during our experience.

Before interpreting Husserl's analysis of passivity and activity, I pointed out that this analysis primarily aims to describe the course of visual experience. This now presents us with two problems. The first of them can be called sonic and the second phenomenological. At the heart of the first problem is the question of what plausibility Husserl's analysis of passivity and activity can have in relation to our sonic experience? In the previous part of the work, I presented the dynamics of hearing and listening. This dynamics of hearing and listening is also influenced by Merleau-Ponty's concept of being-in-the-world (Être au monde).[21] In this sense, the dynamics of hearing and listening should reflect the specific nature of being-in-the-world. This is also the reason why we turn here to Merleau-Ponty's thinking. A key aspect of the whole dynamics of hearing and listening is from the beginning its validity in relation to the nature of our sonic experience as it is shown in our perception. Now, however, we must ask what this has to do with Husserl's analysis of the passive–active dynamics of experience.

For Merleau-Ponty, being-in-the-world is no cogito, that is, it is not just an act of consciousness. This statement is essential for understanding the nature of being-in-the-world and its specific position in a tradition that is notorious for its emphasis on cogito. And because being-in-the-world is not a cogito, it means that it can be different from both the first and third person perspectives. That means that being-in-the-world should stand prior to objectivity.[22] This encouragement for a return to pre-objective experience plays a crucial role for Merleau-Ponty and is also the reason why he can say that the first philosophical act must be a return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world.[23] As a result, this leads to the primacy of perception, because it is in perception where we can find this pre-objective field that Merleau-Ponty is looking for.

However, this also sounds familiar in relation to Husserl's thinking. Above all, his late text *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* follows a similar path. Husserl wants to return to our natural world as the "source" of our experience and, as a result, of objectivity and science. Does this mean that his position is the same as Merleau-Ponty's? I will try to answer this question in the context of the dynamics of hearing and listening.

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20 This awakening of ego is described as "Rezeptivität des Ich" (Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, 83).

21 Although I am using the English translation of *Être au monde* in the rest of this article, I think that the French original shows better its active nature of heading towards the world.

22 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 92.

23 Ibid., 66.

4 Conclusion

Let us now return to Husserl's analysis of passivity and activity, but this time from the point of view of hearing and listening. We see that passive–active dynamics as ego awakening have certain features in common with our hearing and listening dynamics. In this context, we can see hearing as a passive part of dynamics, while listening as its active and awakened part. Looking now at the acoustic field in the context of passivity and activity, we see other similarities. Even the acoustic field turns out to be a contrasted field, from which the structure of the background and the centre of attention develop, in which the individual sounds coming to our attention are located. In this sense, even in the case of the acoustic field, Husserl's analysis of passivity and activity seems to be justified. Another benefit of passive–active dynamics is also its potential to capture fluctuations and the course of our experience in its full range. This proves to be beneficial in the case of the dynamics of hearing–listening even in the case where we want to avoid being misled by an idealized approach to sonic sensitivity, which builds on the difference between sonic experience and visual experience and leads to sonic experience which is endowed with kind of immersive power and ambiguity that does not allow a critical relation to sound.[24] Passive–active dynamics, together with the results of the studies I presented in the previous part of the work, show a wide range of natures of listening, which can push the sounds of our surroundings completely into the background, as well as in attentive listening mode can fill its entire field of attention with a single sound.

Does this mean, then, that Husserl's passive–active dynamics exactly match the dynamics of hearing and listening? Not quite. I believe that the main problem with Husserl's analysis is its inability to fully capture the phenomenal richness of perception and being-in-the-world as we presented it in the context of Merleau-Ponty's thinking. The core of this problem is the parcelization of our experience, which we see in Husserl's analysis.[25] By parcelization I mean the process of fixed division of a certain specific field. In our case, this field is then the perceptual field in all its original wholeness, as we experience it in our natural pre-reflexive experience of the world. I believe that this parcelization is particularly problematic if we want to meet the demands of phenomenology and return to the pre-objective world of our perception.[26] As soon as we look at the phenomenal field of our experience, we have to ask (a) what is the reason for the parcelization of our experience and the related (b) where does the visual primacy versus sonic come from? Both of these points reflect Husserl's approach, and both prove problematic at a time when we appreciate the richness and entanglement of the phenomenal field of our perception and being-in-the-world.

Does this mean that we should therefore break with Husserl's passive–active dynamics? Not at all. It is only necessary to get rid of the parcelization of the phenomenal field of our experience. Once we relate to the passive–active dynamics with respect to the richness of being-in-the-world its legitimacy will be shown to us. Traces of this approach can be found in Husserl's own analyses from *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*.[27] In the analyses of sleep and wakefulness, we can see a passive–active dynamics, which now captures the nature of being-in-the-world much more accurately. And it is here that we see closeness with our dynamics of hearing and listening. The way we listen to our surroundings reflects the richness of being-in-the-world. The nature of this being-in-the-world also shows why it is necessary to think of the relationship of hearing and listening as a dynamic and complementary relationship. It follows that if we want to approach sonic thinking from a phenomenological perspective, it means approaching it precisely through the richness and entanglement of our being-in-the-world. To get to the complex nature of

24 See Schrimshaw, "Exit Immersion."

25 This can eventually lead to the question of how it is possible to "isolate" one sensoric field from the wholeness of experience. (Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 43–4).

26 This parcelization also reflects the way in which Husserl approaches phenomena. It has a certain "positive attention" and differs, for example, from Heidegger's approach to the phenomenon, as Ihde shows. (Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 217).

27 Husserl, *Grenzprobleme*, 26.

perception, we must try to avoid the temptation to divide and organize our experience into individual sensory fields. This will open the way for us to overcome the prejudice of the primacy of visuality.

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