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Hermeneutics of “Auditioning”: Contemporizing Tensions Between “Modernity” and “Modernism” through a Poetics of Resonance

Abstract: Following Toma in *Understanding Nancy, Understanding Modernism* (2023), one might define relations between modernity and modernism as a series of tensions connecting “then” and “now”. What follows suggests that, by employing sound as an ontological starting place, such tensions could be productively contemporized through an aesthetics of sonority, specifically a hermeneutic methodology I term “auditioning”. Amplifying the relational themes of coexistence and correspondence inherent to sound, this framing allows for the simultaneous consonance and dissonance of “then” and “now”. This essay applies the motif of auditioning as a kind of meta-critique of recent attempts – e.g., Moraru’s *Flat Aesthetics* (2023) – to engage with the contemporary modern, in a manner that disrupts anthropocentrism.

Keywords: Hermeneutics; Auditioning; Modernity; Modernism; Poetics; Resonance; Sound; Aesthetics; Anthropocene.

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If modernist scholarship commonly understands modernism to stand ambivalently pro and contra modernity – both engrossed and detached, present and absent – how might the field’s current or near future of critique sound? In the introduction to *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (2022), Timothy Bewes queries whether or not the “quality of the literature of our period” – that is, the contemporary modern of the Anthropocene – fosters a “space of [...] disconnection”¹. If modernism today is also determined by our own discourse about it, our present hermeneutics, might the anthropocentric tonality subtending such inquiry and exposition be partly complicit in harbouring a “register of narrative [...] crisis and disorientation”²? Bewes suggests that “there is no historical period [more so than our own] in which the question of thought comes more directly into focus [within its literature] as a problem and no period in which it is more difficult to address”³. To perpetuate such narratives of disconnection is to foster the very human exceptionalism this essay hopes to transgress.

So, how might these issues of tension and coexistence be productively addressed? What follows is an attempt to examine the fragility of the work's traditional ideas and qualities in the postfictional age, by providing a meta-critique of recent attempts by modernist studies (Toma, Moraru, Bewes,) to engage with it⁴. Premised around tenets of sound (e.g., resonance, reciprocity, tactility) this paper offers an ecological thinking – indebted to the ontological schema of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, via his augmentation of Martin Heidegger – an equalization of agency between human and nonhuman, thought and affect. I will argue that the relations between modernity and modernism might be novelly and productively articulated through the ontological expressiveness of a sonorous aesthetics, by a hermeneutic methodology I term “auditioning”, a poetics of resonance.

“Auditioning” and “Ambience”:

A Note on Methodology

My ideas of “auditioning” and a “poetics of resonance” are, in some respects, tautologous. Both prescribe a thinking *through sound*, to displace the anthropic province associated with the subjective conundrum of interpreting reality. I propose the aesthetic tropes of sonority as an alternative means of interpretation and an agent of methodological reorientation. This is in counterpoint to the hegemony of what I call “scopo-hylomorphia”, the visually biased current of hylomorphism – an Aristotelian notion which conflates matter (*hylē*) and form (*morphē*) as constitutive of being (*ousia*) – prevalent in Western thought today⁵. In so doing, my intentions are not to prescribe sound as a “truer” way

of expression than vision. Rather, auditioning is to do with a kind of *retuning* of articulacy. More than a mere figure of speech, auditioning gestures toward making grammar more susceptible to the nonhuman agencies operating inside and around it, stressing the call of things, the enchantment of one entity to another; agencies as exerting influence. As such, auditioning develops from my related critique of Western realism's reductive, primarily visualist grammar, which perpetuates a problematic anthropological bias⁶. By contrast, I argue that reality need not be articulated in reductive terms of either/or, but as the *ambience* between such binary clauses.

What exactly do I mean by “ambience”? Etymologically, the adjective “ambient” is rooted in the Latin *ambientem*, the present participle of *ambire* meaning “go about”. The noun, “ambience”, borrowed from the French *ambiance* (meaning “surroundings”), signals towards tenets of sound such as resonance, tactility, and reciprocation⁷. This offers a means of thinking that allows for an aestheticization of being, which the presiding tropes of human exceptionalism do not. A means of thinking primarily concerned with an equalization of agency between *all* entities. As a hermeneutic method, auditioning emerges from the Heideggerian locus where Graham Harman and Jean-Luc Nancy intersect, offering a rescaling of the parameters of traditional hermeneutics such that it becomes a unifying ontological and transjective mode of being in the world. Or, to borrow a phrase from social theory, a “transversal politics”, which recognises that not one size fits all, and productively unites while also differentiating⁸.

Originating in Latin and meaning "hear", "*aud*"'s associations with the likes of "audible" and "audio" convey the desired definitions of being's communality. Yet *aud* is also in "*audience*". Insofar as an audience is generally conceived to be not only the focus, but also the auditor of sound – as suggested by the evaluative consequences of "audition" – the term has secondary connotations. These subcurrents imply the opening up of an evaluative distance between the passivity of a performer's givenness and its mediative audience, all of which invokes the humancentric paradigm of subject-object relations. What I am actually proposing, however, is to deprivilege the anthropocentrism implied by such a dynamic. In this sense, a true communalism of being would dispense with the concept of an audience entirely, thus dissolving any remoteness of appraisal.

I will begin in earnest by extemporizing a little on the motif of "disconnection". In his introductory essay to *Understanding Nancy, Understanding Modernism* (2023), Cosmin Toma defines the relation between modernity and modernism as a tension connecting "then" and "now" as "the impossibility of [a] reconciliation [...which] stresses [...] necessary coexistence"⁹. Such a framing allows for the identity and difference of "then" and "now", for their consonance and dissonance. The very nature of the active correspondence between this binary suggests not only a dialogue between two perpetually mobile sites ("modernity" and "modernism"), but also a paradoxical holding together-apart, what Martin Heidegger calls "nearhood" [*Nabtheit*], or Nancy a "continuous-discontinuity"¹⁰. The latter's conceptual explorations of "community" and "reciprocity", via a nuancing

of the former's *Mitsein* ("being-with"), emphasise relationality as a crucial ontological force¹¹. Nancy purposefully follows this democratic register as a means of evading the perpetuation of thought as a grounding principle of being, disrupting reductive binaries, in pursuit of a "groundlessness [...] so characteristic of modernism"¹².

It is Nancy's later, more broadly "sonic" conceptualizations of "touch" and "community", as expressed in *Listening* (2002/07) and thereafter, that informs my articulation of *ambience* as an intermediate space, a thematic interstice capable of expressing the paradoxical state between unity and disunity. Nancy's problematizing of established oppositions, his articulation of being through a reciprocal touching, via an affectual environment, his mobilization of language away from an anthropomorphic hegemonizing of the visual, allows contemporary thought to account for modernity, modernism, and their interplay.

How might employing an amplification of sound's radical reciprocity, to explore how postmillennial modernist studies can rethink the predominant situatedness of the human within the world, work? Nancy holds that "[a]ffect, in itself, is also of the order of resonance. [...] to be affected, it is necessary to have already been affected, which is to say that affect presupposes itself"¹³. "[S]tructures of affect", he continues, "of 'being affected', [...] are, in some ways, older than the subject itself"¹⁴. This approach – history as a perpetual loop or echo that exists in excess of the (human) subject, or what Toma calls "the notion of a radical yet repeating beginning", rather than teleological flow – facilitates questions such as: where, if anywhere, does "modernity" end and "modernism" begin¹⁵?

These affectual themes of coexistence, movement, and correspondence might, I contend below, efficiently aid an account of “contemporary” modernism commensurate with the continuous-discontinuity of “our” age: the simultaneous coexistence of “past” and “presence”, their integration as equally active loci.

Granular (Post)Modernism, Ontological Disjecta?

Even now, in the Anthropocene era of humanity’s awareness of its injurious global impact, a rhetoric of exceptionalism is perpetuated: the post-Cartesian belief, implicit or otherwise, that humans carry more ethical and ontological weight than all other entities. Following this top-down hierarchical system, the human-world relation has become metonymic of *all* relations, such that the unification of the terms “human” and “nonhuman” somehow completes the composition of being in its totality. This conviction, that all the vast and innumerable remainder of being – i.e., all things in existence *that are not human* – can be adequately abridged to, and contained by, the term “nonhuman”, is not only reductive, but narcissistic.

Emerging from this milieu, Christian Moraru’s concept of “flat aesthetics” (*Flat Aesthetics*, 2023) offers a pioneering ontological engagement with the disjunctive nature of the contemporary modern, as discussed in works by the likes of Toma or Bewes¹⁶. Moraru’s project is consonant with American metaphysician Graham Harman’s mobilization of aesthetics as “first philosophy”¹⁷. The “flat” of “flat aesthetics” pertains to a widening of the ontological bandwidth, such that the human

is no longer privileged. The notion of a “flat ontology” has a convoluted genealogy within theoretical literature. Its complex history begins with Roy Bhaskar’s 1975 text, *A Realist Theory of Science*, wherein the expression is used, pejoratively, in reference to the ontological reduction, or flattening, of the world into terms accessible to human consciousness. In Bhaskar’s words,

the world, which ought to be viewed as a multi-dimensional structure independent of man, came to be squashed into a flat surface whose characteristics, such as being constituted by atomistic facts, were determined by the needs of a particular concept of knowledge. [...] Thus the world was literally turned inside out in an attempt to confine it within sentience¹⁸.

Of a more recent vintage, Manuel DeLanda recuperates the term as an anti-reductionist manoeuvre equalizing the ontological status of all entities¹⁹. It is this more nuanced sense of “flatness”, as an ontological equilibrium capable of thinking what “is” on a more horizontal plane, that Harman’s object-oriented ontology (OOO), and, subsequently, Moraru’s “flat aesthetics” attempt to disseminate.

As a radicalized version of Aristotelian substance philosophy, OOO theorises that the “primary dualism in the world is not between matter and mind, but between objects and relations”, advocating for objects as the essential component of reality²⁰. OOO evolves out of the tool analytic from Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927), which identifies a relational system connecting all beings – specifically, in this example, a hammer – to

two levels of Being²¹. The hammer exists at a practical level, as "presence-at-hand [*Vorhandenheit*]", and a theoretical level, as "readiness-to-hand [*Zuhandenheit*]"²². The practical register pertains to the hammer's being as something specific; that is, as *this* very hammer, while the theoretical register equates to the hammer's general being as *something at all*. The interrelation of *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit* acts as what Heidegger calls the "as-structure [*die Als-Struktur*]", a means of expressing the ontological difference between Being and beings²³. To this formula, Harman adds Edmund Husserl's bifurcation of the perceptual plane into objective and qualitative poles²⁴. Husserl emphasises an object's existence as a series of profiles within the horizon-structure of any given moment of being, rather than some fundamental subtending object. This structure is constitutive of the content of experience via discrete units of "hyletic Data [*hyletischen Daten*]"²⁵. One of Husserlian phenomenology's main concerns is how these granular units are collected together to constitute a unified object. Its solution is to suspend any accent on Kantian noumena (things-in-themselves) by foregrounding phenomena. The mind's immanent relation to the outside world, therefore, consists of intentional objects and their qualities. OOO inherits its dyad of real objects and real qualities from Heidegger, its sensual objects and sensual qualities from Husserl, and formulates these four basic compositional poles as inherent to all entities.

Key to OOO's argument is the relation between *Zuhandenheit* or readiness-to-hand (as the permanently withdrawn surplus being of real objects), and

Vorhandenheit or presence-at-hand (as the experientially manifest sensual object). The former subtends the latter, for Harman, objects and their qualities are either present or absent. Real qualities present themselves to the intellect, while sensual qualities present themselves to the senses. The Heideggerian realm withdraws while the Husserlian adheres, the former bequeathing absence, the latter presence. Although the aestheticization of being, as articulated in Harmanian thought, is productive for democratizing the ontological statuses of things, *how* this aestheticization is articulated is obstructive, at least as far as my own schema is concerned. OOO's rhetorical choices impede its "flat" goals. Aesthetic causation is predominantly conveyed, therein, through scopic allusion to presence and form.

My term for this, for Western thought's reductive conflation of matter and form with the scopic, is "scopo-hylomorphism"²⁶. The hylomorphic is commonly collapsed into the scopic as part of philosophy's anthropocentric mode of definition. Thus consciousness, the ocular, and the symbiosis of the two, are posited as vital criteria in the arbitration of the nature of being. Yet, although often treated – tacitly – as if they are synonymous, issues of matter, form, and the scopic are not easily collapsed into one another. To wit: not all hylomorphia is axiomatically visual. Instead, what is at stake are the presumptions of ideas about visibility informing arguments about matter and vice versa, each to the detriment of other aesthetic and expressive modes. As a result of this, there is a morphological bias inherent to OOO's metaphorization of the real. Harman's aesthetics suggest presence through

an immediate sensual manifestation, or an implied presence intimated by a real object's absence.

Despite Moraru's positive contributions to narrative discourses on what Bewes calls the postfictional age, and his rejection of "the notion that human presence is the predicate [...] of other presences", his grammatical choices align him with the scopo-hylomorphism I find perplexingly reductive in *OOO*²⁷. Moreover, Moraru diminishes relations even further than Harman, for whom, at least, the excess existence of real objects is still vaguely dynamic, such that it withdraws. For flat aesthetics there is not even this indeterminate vibrancy: the being of things does not recede. Moraru's exegesis is unequivocal: "objects do not 'withdraw' by hiding their 'reality' in the world's chiaroscuro. To the contrary [...things...] step forward and show themselves more saliently"²⁸. The being of things is perpetually present as a vector of maximal exposure he calls "hyperpresence", in which objects "'light up' ontologically"²⁹. This conflation of matter, form, and the scopic continues, unabating. In a manner consonant with Plato's notion of *eidos* as that which enables presence, linked to the abstract Forms, "appearance is [...] inseparable from [an object's] essence"³⁰. Quantified through a "look", or "gaze", "the object works like a prism" it is "optical", "surficial", existing "in plain sight"³¹. *Flat Aesthetics* maps out an object-oriented literary history, of the postmillennial fictive era (Moraru points towards Don DeLillo's 2003 novel, *Cosmopolis*, as an example): a "notoriously volatile category", one in which objects "aggregate the contemporary, crafting it and defining it for us"³².

Contra Bewes and Moraru's harmonious theories that disconnection is almost completely unique to the literature of *our* postmillennial period, Beci Carver argues for an earlier periodization of quantum existentialism. Carver classifies the post-literary Naturalism era of the early twentieth century under the wonderfully atomistic rubric: "Granular Modernism"³³. The prior phase's predilection for "representing [things] 'as they really are' atrophies into the latter's general 'refusal to generate meaning out of detail'³⁴. Carver characterizes the fragmentary nature of the Modern condition –practised by granular modernists like Evelyn Waugh, T.S. Eliot, or Samuel Beckett –as a humanity siloed. For Carver, the "substance of modernness is difference", exemplified by a "granular incoherence" of "collapsible things"; the fragile, delicate, ineffable relations between a "dissolving present" and the "abstract future"³⁵. This suggestion, in Carver, of a fluxic paradigm to modernity, between thing and event, or, as Toma would have it, between "then" and "now", assigns a certain ontological power to "difference", one analogous to ideas of differentiation heard in the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze.

Both individually, and in his works with Felix Guattari, Deleuze provides a critique of concreteness and discontinuity with his philosophy of difference, interpreting the world not as a large set of identities but as a composition set about by difference. In other words, difference *itself* is accentuated in Deleuze's ontological system rather than the hierarchical determinism of identification, thus affording a means of avoiding the perpetuation of the anthropological bias for identity over

difference. The particular emerges from the general, with identity (particularity) as an emergent property of difference as divergence, thus necessitating its subsistence as continuous³⁶. Here, Deleuze anticipates – and is sympathetic towards – my own thematic reorientation of Nancy's ideas about the transitive conditions of sound as an ontological model for reality's autonomy. The difference of beings cannot be gauged by appeal to their thingly uniqueness, Deleuze contends, only by virtue of the difference of being that produces them. This differential metaphysics proposes that the world is not composed of "things", of atomistic units, as such, but, rather, that it is phenomenal consciousness which gives rise to discontinuity. Rationalism compartmentalises the continuous and processual into discrete and isolated quasi-things. Outside the structuring tendencies of human comportment there is no singular definitive point at which an entity becomes itself and is – in this state of finality – separable from the ontogenetic relational processes that generate it.

The favouring of the equation that thought beget subjectivity is symptomatic of mind's ascension to the zenith of metaphysical import, such that thought facilitates individuation. In opposition to such ontological narratives Deleuze defines the virtual as a state of ontological possibility: a field of differential gestures and actions which gives rise to structural epistemes such as the Kantian "phenomenon" and "noumenon". The virtual is conceived as a fluctual zone of reconciliation between these differences, such that they can be harmonious without violating their absolute differences – differences which ostensibly constitute and create their specific

identities. This is how Deleuze (and Nancy) theorises the world: not as a large set of identities but as a composition set about by difference. In other words, difference *itself* is accentuated rather than the hierarchical determinism of identification, thus affording a means of avoiding the perpetuation of the anthropological bias for identity over difference. Conceptualized in this Deleuzo-Nancean register, granular modernism's consistence in a causality that is nonlinear, in a "chaos" of "segmentalized experience", wherein no "event seems to be a consequence of the events that lead up to it", can be more coherently fathomed in terms of its fecundity³⁷. This is counter to hegemonized forms of knowledge which theorise time as sequential, which impose serial duration on reality. This reiterates philosophy's privileging of the present, and, as such, is symptomatic of a larger issue concerning realism's inability to think outside the givenness, the presence of temporal reality.

How might one begin the process of deprivileging anthropo-visual themes within current philosophically oriented modernist discourses such as those found in Moraru or Bewes? This conundrum is akin to the general problem encountered in orthodox hermeneutic interpretation: the lack of any opening through which to enter the conversation (the human is always already on the inside of any argument that attempts to displace it). There is no obvious starting place – no nodal entrance – for an initial engagement with anthropo-ocular-centrism, owing in large part to the aesthetic language of Moraru, Bewes, et al., and their modes of expression. In response to this, the ensuing section, is, in some basic sense, an attempt to choose a point and begin.

“Auditioning” Hermes, Heidegger, and Nancy: Hermeneutics as a Poetics of Resonance

The *logos* – meaning, in archaic Greek, “speech”, or, to take turns in speaking – has, at least within Occidental thought, come to be associated with Aristotle’s notion of “λόγος αποφαντικός” (*logos apofantikos*)³⁸. By itself, *αποφαση* (*apofansi*) – the root word of *apofantikos* – as well as the related *αποφάνσις* (*apophansis*), imply the formal expression of an opinion or statement: to come to a decision³⁹. In Aristotelian thought, however, a capitalized *Logos apofantikos* pertains to speaking in absolute terms (as in authoritative speech). Consequently, an entrenched mode of thinking has accreted around Λόγος, positioning *Logos* as a grounding principle of Being: a synonym for the “inceptual word” of God⁴⁰. Phrased differently, the founding root of Being is defined in absolute terms, as a total monist ground, a fundamental superordinate; that is, as a being.

Among the associations that orbit the noun “hermeneutics” (ἑρμηνεύω: *hermēneuō*, “interpret”, or “translate”) is a connection with Hermes, the Greek messenger god⁴¹. Hermes translates that which is beyond worldly comprehension – i.e., the Word (or voice) of God – into the intelligible forms of language and writing. As divine mediator, simultaneously connecting and demarcating two thresholds, his liminal position is the medial point of translating the unknowable into the knowable. His voice (Λόγος, *Logos*) is transduced into meaning (the written word), leading to the inception of human knowing. The Hermesian transduction of divine information into mortal understanding is allegorical of

the entire trajectory of Western thought. Epistemologies of human knowledge production historically follow the hermeneutic model, focusing almost exclusively on the reinterpretation of biblical texts as humanity’s fundamental basis of understanding and knowledge, reinforcing a meta-linguistic circuitry of analyzing language *through* language.

But the position held by the Hermesian figure is structurally ambiguous. A more considered analysis of the theological roots of hermeneutics betrays an implicit auditory register⁴². As an arbiter within a continuum of interpretation, Hermes is symbolic primarily of understanding, but also an emblem of arbitration. With the transposition of sound (His voice) into text, Hermes constitutes the mediator between divine aurality and earthly knowledge. By combining sound (language) with form (writing), Hermes ontologises humankind, bringing it – and its comprehension of itself – forth into, and via, audition. Considering the Hermesian *dramatis persona* as a metaphor for writing, the act of writing itself can be thought of in allegorical terms: as the mediating aspects of logocentric practices. By “logocentric”, I mean those strands of thought which 1) insist that any reference to discourse equates to talking about words, and 2) which uphold the centrality of a vocabulary stressing that the written word is fundamentally all there is. It is this medial point of transference between two forms of information – in this case: audition and vision – that provides the ambiguity of the original intersection at which human attempts to interpret understanding become established as scopical. Here, the visual medium of writing begins to superintend as the primary means of

aesthetic translation. Along this historical curve, sonority gradually yields to vision.

It is perhaps apposite to designate the realm of epistemization associated with Hermes's transposition of the divine (His voice) into the mortal (written word) with the lowercase λόγος (*logos*), rather than the capitalized Λόγος (*Logos*). Compared with the absolute rendering of Λόγος (*Logos*), the lowercase λόγος can be conceptualized as indicating a reciprocal being, a multitudinous communality, and the mutual constitution of things. As an ontological manoeuvre, Heidegger removes the formality of Aristotle's authoritative speech, thereby attempting to break with any associative notions of a foundational "grounding". Instead, he traces an older order of existence back to its pre-Aristotelian Greek roots – a more colloquial and informal, "saying" (*sagen*, in German) or "speaking", which he locates in Homer⁴³. By sounding out the anterior means of ontological articulation, Heidegger amplifies the relative, contiguous, and egalitarian Being of the lowercase *logos*, broadening the expression of Being, back to its Presocratic abundance.

What, in the 1943 Heraclitus lecture cycle, Heidegger calls a "special form of harmony" – the "apartness of an expanse that is, at the same time, held together" – is very similar to the "nearing nearness" or "nearhood" [*Nahheit*] discussed in the "Time and Being" essay (1969)⁴⁴. Both stress a close proximity that need not result in direct contact. In this sense, Heidegger anticipates those themes in Nancy concerning the ambiguities of touch, as well as Deleuze's paradoxical empowerment of difference, which reduces (but never completely elides) thingly variance: a holding together, which also maintains separation.

As a resistance against opposites, Nancy's cosmology is the constant communion between fusion and fission, an articulation of "we" that circumvents its apotheosis, without absolutizing the plurality into a singularity. To this extent, Nancy's ontological schema, like Deleuze, is neither holistic nor atomistic. Its engine is dissimilarity and variance, the productivity of change and diversity, and the efficacy sustained in the ontological ambiguity between homogeneity and heterogeneity.

Pursuing these growing themes of recursion and circuitry, what is "granular" and "disconnect[ed]" in Carver and Bewes respectively, becomes ineluctably relational through Nancy's idea of "*renvoi*", whereby a sonorous body (*corps sonore*) subsists as an echoic zone of reverberation, of inestimable deferrals and referrals⁴⁵. Charlotte Mandell translates "*renvoi*" variously as "reference" or "return" in *Listening*; the harmony between both cognates proves particularly salient⁴⁶. The return (echo) that refers back to a *corps sonore*, in the process of its auto-production, describes the ontogenesis of identity as activity. *Renvoi*, as the substantiation of the subject through affect, articulates a kind of conflated subjectivity-objectivity that exceeds thought. In the Latourian sense of hermeneutics as worldly property, this affectual relativism – if it can be called as such – does not require a prerequisite ideation, as, say, Heidegger does; nor does it incubate subjectivity in any sense that might axiomatically presuppose phenomenal consciousness⁴⁷. Resonance and vibration are employed as aesthetic synonyms, to convey how subjectivity reaches beyond itself in its differentiation.

The inception of an instantiation of being is implied to be recursive, here, a

folding through which the ambiguous indiscrete-discrete *corps sonore* is constituted. Such is the performativity of *renvoi*: scission becomes a conditioning element in the emission of a body. A *corps sonore* (singular) is constituted not only through the congregational touch, weight, and pressure of other *corps sonore* (plural), but also in the returning relations of its own being; the “self” acting on itself, in its auto-creation, as *renvoi*. “The remarkable corollary of this” writes Sarah Hickmott, citing fellow Nancy scholar, Adrienne Janus, is that “all objects, insofar as they resonate” are able, therefore, to be listening subjects; this has the consequent (and no doubt intentional) effect of making Nancy’s “human” subject less properly “subject’-like, less human”⁴⁸. Much as silence structures noise, so rhythm punctuates a subjective being into the pulsings and oscillations of subjective beings. This rhythmizing of being is the amplification of particular existents out of a general ontological milieu, what Nancy calls the “imposing [of] form on the continuous”⁴⁹.

Nancy’s conceptualization of *renvoi* as a return, an echo, a folding back, implies a temporality that is nonlinear (akin to that of Carver’s granular modernism), thus cheating common sense conceptions of time that emphasise its fundamental continuity. More pertinently, the aesthetico-affectual schema of a sonic ontology (a *sontology*?) provides philosophical modernist studies with a novel means of approaching contemporary modern literature. This mode of engagement, i.e., auditioning as a poetics of resonance, could potentially contemporise tensions between “modernity” and “modernism”, while expanding the articulation of reality beyond simplistic binary clauses like “either/or”,

and destabilizing the human from such narratives. At the very least, a hermeneutics of auditioning offers a crucial step in the journey towards these goals.

Aesthetic Reverberations, Ontological Vibration: A Conclusion

As I have argued elsewhere, the sovereignty of Harman’s objects becomes increasingly tenuous under concentrated inquisition⁵⁰. He suppresses the eventual-relational registers of reality which silently undergird some OOO, suggesting the grounding of his thinking, if only partially, in an ontology that he would presumably reject: one premised on process-relational causation. To wit: Harman’s objects actually rely upon – and are ontologically preceded by – forces (relations), suggesting that these forces are not objects, and, most importantly, neither are objects, at least not entirely. To this extent, without meaning to, Harman also has a quasi-processual – thus, I argue, implicitly sonorous – ontology subtending what he wants to say, located in the ontological ambience amid *relata* and relations. Moreover, this would seem to oppose the conscious intentions of his metaphysical system (i.e., the valorizing of *disjuncta*), both implicitly and explicitly, therefore clarifying that his rhetoric purposefully mutes any alternative.

As with Harman, so too with Moraru. The latter’s attempts to taxonomise process as objects also prove to be concomitantly affectual and processual. Despite his ocularcentric phrasing – e.g., literary history as “a blur of moving milestones”, an “historical canvas” whose “image is clear *and* fuzzy [...] pointillistic” – the contemporary era’s “discrete ‘epochality’” is also “fluid [...] and

protean"⁵¹. Things persist in "ontological vibration" and "aesthetic reverberations", and are defined variously as "force[s]", "event[s]", or "energ[ies]" that are "felt"⁵². Yet, equally, to concentrate entirely on relations is to detrimentally scorn the objective layer of reality to which Harman is predisposed. Either form of ontological collapse – objects into relations, or relations into objects – is not only flawed but unsustainable. All levels of reality are equally real, thus deserving of accommodation and consideration by any earnestly balanced ontology. Objects and relations require commensurate ontological statuses.

To softly repurpose Carver's granular modernism, there is, in a manner of speaking, a precedent for an object-oriented sonority, broadly understood. This ontoaesthetic counterpart can be heard in Greek composer and theorist, Iannis Xenakis's atomistic premise of *microsound*. Taking Pierre Schaeffer's idea of the "sound object [*objet sonore*]" – i.e., sounds as aesthetic objects in their own right, rather than signifiers of a source – to their extreme Xenakis postulates sonority as composed of disjuncta⁵³. "All sound", he writes,

is an integration of grains, of elementary sonic particles, of sonic quanta. [...] even continuous musical variation, is conceived as an assemblage of a large number of elementary sounds adequately disposed in time. In the attack, body, and decline of a complex sound, thousands of pure sounds appear in a more or less short interval of time⁵⁴.

Following Xenakis, American composer-theorist, Curtis Roads builds his

notion of *granular synthesis*, in which the idea of microsound is turned into actual musical practice. "A grain of sound", writes Roads,

is a brief microacoustic event, with a duration near the threshold of human auditory perception, typically between one thousandth of a second and one tenth of a second (from 1 to 100 ms). [...] A single grain serves as a building block for sound objects. By combining thousands of grains over time, we can create animated sonic atmospheres⁵⁵.

Roads traces this vector of thought back to Greek antiquity, specifically the Presocratic scholars Leucippus and Democritus, who prescribed that all matter is fundamentally composed of atoms colliding in the void⁵⁶. Roads pinpoints Hungarian-British physicist, Dennis Gabor's 1947 paper, "Acoustical Quanta and the Theory of Hearing", as another important intervention, specifically its argument that "any sound could be decomposed into acoustical quanta bounded by discrete units of time and frequency"⁵⁷. This object-oriented theory of audition is, in a sense, a simple issue of traditional physics. "Sound, at its lowest and loudest, begins to break down into separate vibrations", writes Shelley Trower, in the introduction to *Senses of Vibration* (2012), "[s]low the sound down further and each vibration might be separated out, counted, added up; there is no more sound, just individual shocks, one at a time"⁵⁸. In an *ontological* sense, however, this objective sound – as quasi-discrete units of vibration – remains inherently relational. This sonic thematization can be found in Nancy's later works. His rethinking of the

liminality of Kant's human-world relation, through the aesthetic tropes of sound – as resonance, as ambience – allows for the distinguishing and separating of boundaries (e.g., between “modernity” and “modernism”); for how they delineate contexts, while also enabling their contact, their bordering of one another.

The territory of theory in this area is lacking. As such, the present study has attempted to counter this dearth by positing what might happen when the contemporary modern is sought in a different way, one that is fundamentally sonorous. Inevitably, almost by definition, any claim that the sonic is “truer” than the visual is immediately undone by the fact that it is just another (human) sense base. To this end, I am not claiming that my sonorous reading holds any higher validity or is in any sense superior to other narratives. Rather, I am claiming that thinking about the relationship between modernity and

modernism, *through sound*, makes it possible to make different and novel claims – e.g., that the literary real need not be reductively parsed into either substance (objects) or process (relations); that there is an *ambience* between entities which facilitates their being; that these postulates can produce an ontological democracy based on affect, rather than thought – and that these claims are useful because they advance contemporary modernist arguments in productive new ways. Auditioning, as a hermeneutic methodology, aids a narrative reorientation between modernity and modernism, to a more nuanced, less adversarial register. This increased fidelity destabilizes the orthodox position that modernism stands ambivalently for and against modernity, while also amplifying their concord. The resulting contemporization of their tensions, via a poetics of resonance, gestures toward a radical means through which to “hear” modernity afresh.

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NOTES

1. Timothy Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*, New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2022, p. 6.
2. *Ibidem*, p. 2.
3. *Ibidem*, p. 3.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 2.
5. Jamie Stephenson, *Auditioning Ontology: Towards an Ambient Metaphysics*. PhD thesis, Leeds: University of Leeds, 2023, p.2. Consider the “Granular (Post)Modernism, Ontological Disjecta” section below for more detailed discussions of scopo-hylomorphism.
6. Stephenson, *Auditioning Ontology*, 2023.
7. Robert K. Barnhart, (ed.), *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, London: Chambers, 2011, p. 29; 28.
8. Marcel Stoezler and Nira Yuval-Davis, “Standpoint theory, situated knowledge and the situated imagination”, in *Feminist Theory*, no. 3, 2002, p. 315.

9. Cosmin Toma, "Introduction", in Cosmin Toma (ed.), *Understanding Nancy, Understanding Modernism*, New York, London, Dublin, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, p. 9.
10. Martin Heidegger, "Time and Being", in *On Time and Being*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh, New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1972, orig. 1969, p. 15; Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Heart of Things", trans. by Brian Homes and Rodney Trumble, in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes and others, California: Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 186.
11. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995, orig. 1927, p. 205, 162.
12. Cosmin Toma, "Introduction", 2023, p. 12.
13. Jean-Luc Nancy and Irving Goh, "Variations on the Reprise", in *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Fall 2018, p. 225.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 227.
15. Cosmin Toma, 'Introduction', 2023, p. 10.
16. Christian Moraru, *Flat Aesthetics: Twenty-First-Century American Fiction and the Making of the Contemporary*, New York and London, Bloomsbury, 2023.
17. Graham Harman, "Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human", in *Naked Punch*, no. 9, 2007, p. 21-30.
18. Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, orig. 1975, p. 35.
19. Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2013, orig. 2002, p. 51.
20. Graham Harman, "Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos: A New Theory of Causation", in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2010, p. 4.
21. Throughout the present work I have made the technical decision to render the noun "being" as capitalized when referring explicitly to the Heideggerian concept of reality's fundamental structuration (i.e., "Being", *Sein*). More generally, I have opted for the lowercase variant (i.e., "being") so as to maintain the verbal sense of the term as a description of, or a pertaining to, a form of action (i.e., "be-ing"), owing to Heidegger's own contextual nuances. On a similar note, my use of the plural noun "beings" denotes particular instances of individuated Being/being. I should also state that, for the most part, I have opted to use "being" and "reality" as interchangeable ontological descriptors.
22. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1995, p. 95-102, 66-69.
23. *Ibidem*, 149-151. Section 32. p. 189-192, original emphasis. Heidegger describes the as-structure as "that which is *explicitly* understood –has the structure of *something as something*", 149, p. 189.
24. Edmund Husserl, "Intentional Objects", in *Early Writings in the Philosophy of Logic and Mathematics*, trans. by Dallas Willard, Dordrecht, Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994, p. 345-387. Husserl asserts that reality is merely the collection of objects of an intentional act of mind. With this gesture, he evidences a phenomenal tension between objects and their qualities. An object displays qualities which change, but this mutability does not mean the object becomes a different thing.
25. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy – First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. by F. Kersten, The Hague, Boston, Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983, orig. 1913, p. 205, 173.
26. Stephenson, *Auditioning Ontology*, 2023.
27. Christian Moraru, *Flat Aesthetics*, 2023, p. 3.
28. *Ibidem*, p. 7.
29. *Ibidem*, p. 5, original emphasis removed.
30. *Ibidem*, p. 8. The ancient Greek provenance of the term "*eidos*", meaning that which facilitates appearance, form, conception; something seen or intuited. Plato renders *eidos* as *idea*, while Aristotle names it essence. The etymological root of the Greek *ιδέα* (*idea*) is *ιδεῖν* (*idein*) which means "to look". This scopio-hylomorphic undercurrent is fostered by Husserl, such that the mental object is premised on the in/visible. *A Greek-English Lexicon*, seventh edition, compiled by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883, p. 135.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 10; p. 11; p. 12.
32. *Ibidem*, p. 26; p. 27; p. 5.

33. Beci Carver, *Granular Modernism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014
34. *Ibidem*, p. 1; p. 2, my emphasis.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 9; p. 12; p. 10; p. 8.
36. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton, London and New York: Continuum, 2011, orig. 1968; Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, translated by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, London: Athlome Press, 1990, orig. 1969, particularly the discussions of static and dynamic geneses on p.186, 241, 246; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi, London and New York: Continuum, 2009, orig. 1980, especially the topic of stratification and multiplicity, p. 59.
37. Beci Carver, p. 15; p. 17; p. 22.
38. Aristotle, cited by Ingram Bywater in his commentary for his translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909, p. 277.
39. Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1883, p. 204.
40. Martin Heidegger, *Heraclitus*, 2018, p. 135.
41. Martin Heidegger discusses this provenance in “A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer”, in *On the Way to Language*, Trans. by Peter D. Hertz, New York: Harper One, 1971, p. 29.
42. Hillel Schwartz briefly discusses the sonic within the Hermesian myth in *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond*, New York: Zone Books, 2011. Consider, specifically, p. 18-19.
43. *Ibidem*, p. 271. Heidegger points towards Homer’s use of the terms ἀληθέα, ἀληθές, and ἀληεῖν in the *Iliad* to express “saying, recounting, reporting, answering, and asserting”.
44. Martin Heidegger, *Heraclitus*, 2018, p. 115; p. 116; Heidegger, “Time and Being”, 1972, p. 15.
45. It is telling that Moraru almost never refers to the objects of flat aesthetics in explicitly discrete, objective terms. This also speaks to my subtle reorienting of Moraru’s grammatical choices in the ensuing section of this essay.
46. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, Trans. by Charlotte Mandell, New York: Fordham University Press, 2007, orig. 2002, p. 7 ff.; p. 12. ff.
47. “Hermeneutics is not a privilege of humans”, writes Latour, “but [...] a property of the world”. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 245.
48. Sarah Hickmott, “After *Listening*: Music, Musicians, and Modernity”, in Cosmin Toma (ed.), *Understanding Nancy, Understanding Modernism*, New York, London, Dublin, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, p. 76.
49. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, 2007, p. 39.
50. Jamie Stephenson, “Ambient Temporalities: Rethinking Object-Oriented Time through Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger”, in *Open Philosophy*, Volume 7, no. 1, 2024, p. 1-16.
51. Christian Moraru, *Flat Aesthetics*, 2023, p. 22; p. 22; p. 23.
52. *Ibidem*, p. 9; p. 3; p. 6; p. 8; p. 5.
53. Pierre Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects: An Essay across Disciplines*, trans. by Christine North and John Dack, Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017, orig. 1966, p. 228, ff.
54. Iannis Xenakis, *Formalized Music: Thought and Mathematics in Composition*. Revised Edition, Stuyvesant, New York: Pendragon Press, 1992, orig. 1963, p. 43.
55. Curtis Roads, *Microsound*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2001, p. 86-87.
56. *Ibidem*, p. 51.
57. *Ibidem*, p. vii. Dennis Gabor, ‘Acoustical Quanta and the Theory of Hearing’, in *Nature*, 159, 1947, p. 591-594.
58. Shelley Trower, *Senses of Vibration: A History of the Pleasure and Pain of Sound*, New York and London, Continuum, 2012, p. 1.