BLANCHOT AND SOUND

Sonority of nothingness
For anyone even passingly familiar with Maurice Blanchot, it might initially seem surprising to encounter a collection dedicated to exploring sonic encounters with and resonances of or from his work. Blanchot is, after all, known primarily for his engagement with literature and not music and, crucially, this engagement draws heavily on visual metaphor. For instance, Blanchot regularly likens the entry into the region of literature to a plunge into subterranean darkness where the reader will gaze upon the dead, like Orpheus. Similarly, he meditates on the oscillation between appearance and disappearance through the power of the image. And then there is the analogy of the night and the darkening of familiarity in the experience of literature. It is toward these metaphors and images that one typically turns when trying to discuss Blanchot’s work.

References to vision in Blanchot’s work are not without unease. Like when Orpheus turns to cast his gaze on Eurydice on their ascent from the underworld, there is the sense that vision cannot hold on to what it sees in the experience of literature. More importantly for this collection, Stefanie Heine argues in her contribution that Blanchot’s account of the nocturnal space of literature becomes “most palpable when Blanchot sketches it in terms of sound” (59). Similarly, as Leslie Anne Boldt suggests, texts like *Thomas the Obscure* are shot through with scenes of “limited vision, diminished perspectives, and a blurred horizon” (126) at which point there is an appeal to the auditory. It is true that when everything falls into darkness – when the insomniac lies awake in this other night where sleep is impossible and the emergence of the day is delayed – an indistinguishable sound can nevertheless be heard. Heine is right that Blanchot appeals to sound when describing these nocturnal spaces because it is through sound that he is able to capture what lies beneath the image – an anonymous rumbling. Or, as Fort explains, the shadowy reality of the literary image is always a “sonic image” (161): it reverberates with the echoes of what is left behind. What quickly becomes apparent, then, when one looks closely at, or rather when one listens closely to, Blanchot’s work is just how sonorous it is. Sounds follow, accompany, anticipate and even intervene in the visual descriptions of the experience of literature and language. They are an essential part of his attempt to capture limit experiences where one’s very sense of self is radically contested: “To write is to make oneself the echo of that which cannot cease speaking” (SL 27).

David Appelbaum suggests in his contribution, “Through aurality – speaking, hearing, voicing, sonic sensitivity – thought can attune to the necessarily forgotten point in reflection, the exterior” (145). As early as *Thomas the Obscure*, we get a sense of what this means for Blanchot as the non-phenomenal experience of literature is described as having a sonic dimension. It is in this text that Blanchot approaches the proximity between silence and sound and the acoustics of the dead: “She passed through strange dead cities where, rather than petrified shapes, mummified circumstances, she found a necropolis of movements, silences, voids; she hurled herself against the extraordinary sonority of nothingness” (TO 90). In her introduction to *The Space of Literature*, Ann Smock explains how Blanchot hears in art
“murmuring with mute insistence, the very source of creativity” (SL 6). By the time of *The Infinite Conversation*, this murmur gives way to reverberation as “the very space of the image, the animation proper to it, the point of its springing forth where, speaking within, it already speaks entirely on the outside” (IC 321). It is clear, then, that sound works in Blanchot’s writing in varied ways. It has a thematic function as well as being inextricably linked to his account of language, not simply as the auditive dimension of speaking but also as the indeterminable noises heard at the origin of language. It is the sound of creativity and something both real and imagined.

In addition to this mythic dimension of sound in his work, there are also explicit references to sound through discussions of music. There are fewer of these references but their relevance is no less important. An exciting addition to this area is included in this special issue, in English for the first time. Michael Holland has translated a concert review of Debussy’s music written by a young Blanchot for *Journal des débats*. Holland explains what is noteworthy about this piece is how the twenty-five-year-old Blanchot “has already laid the basis for the relation to both literature and politics that he will develop in the writing for which he will later be known” (11). Debussy is significant, according to Blanchot, because his music penetrates the gap between the world and the word through a sound that “apprehends the movement of beauty and art” (12). Or, as Holland explains, for Blanchot Debussy’s “music penetrates […] the milieu in which all art takes place” (11), therefore playing a crucial role in Blanchot’s early thinking about literature. Despite a significant political change from his early to later works, Blanchot nevertheless offers a similar idea in “Ars Nova” (IC 345–50) where he defends atonal music. In her essay “From Dialectics to the Diabolical: Adorno’s ‘New Music’ and Blanchot’s ‘Ars Nova’” Vivian Liska explains how it is music that, for Blanchot, “can ask the question whether ‘man is capable of literature’” (25). In “Ars Nova” it is a specific kind of music that can do this – the fragmentary atonalism of Schönberg, Berg and Webern to be precise – because this music, like the siren’s song, turns us toward the unsettling origin of art that is, necessarily, the “elemental deep” (SL 224) of literature. Music might be on the periphery of Blanchot’s thought in terms of regularity but not in terms of significance. More importantly, however, it must be borne in mind that any attention paid to music is a proximate result of those ideas in his work that are contingent on sound. The rich sonority of Blanchot’s work is found in the intersection between what Douglas Kahn refers to as “actual auditive events” and sounds heard in “myth, idea, or implication” (3).

It is toward the auditory dimensions of Blanchot’s work that this collection turns. The essays contained herein explore the latent and explicit sonic content of Blanchot’s work, his treatment of music and the possibilities of thinking about contemporary music and sound art through his work. There is no underlying, metaphysical intention; the aim is not to subvert the visual through some kind of idealisation of hearing. This would only fall into what Jonathan Sterne refers to as the “audiovisual litany” (9). More importantly, however, the idea of privileging listening is not possible in Blanchot because sound is nearly always heard as a limit experience and contestation of the very principles of idealisation. The idea of “disaster” in the issue’s title is not so much a conceptual thread running through the articles but instead alludes to sound engaged with as this limit experience. The aim is, therefore, to amplify those sounds in Blanchot’s work that have, until now, been relatively muted by considering the sonic dimension of contestation and the possible nexus between Blanchot with music/sound studies.
**Sonic encounters with Blanchot**

Thanks to a translation by Michael Holland, this collection begins with some of Blanchot’s own writings. “The Homage to Debussy at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées” was written by Blanchot in 1932, the day after a monument dedicated to Claude Debussy was unveiled in Paris. On the same evening, Blanchot attended a music festival in the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées which, as he explains, was not only a celebration of Debussy’s music but “a celebration of music itself” (11). Blanchot describes the evening with great fervour, offering glowing accounts of pieces like *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*. This eventually gives way to addressing the broader dimension of art which he feels Debussy’s music pulls us toward. The capacity of art to supersede the world is an idea characteristic of Blanchot’s early Romantic spirit but what is significant in this particular review, as Holland explains in his introduction, is the lack of patriotic/nationalist sentimentality. It is, rather, a matter of divergence away from “politics in its current, nation-centred expression” to an exterior “human perfection” (11) that is significant about this piece. Although typical of his earlier work rather than later work, this piece helps frame the entire approach of the present collection because it ventures to suggest how music (and sound) relates to literature.

The nature of this relationship, and the capacity of music to diverge from culture and history, is precisely what Vivian Liska circles in “From Dialectics to the Diabolical.” Liska expands her extensive engagement with the relationship between Blanchot and Adorno and does so by offering a detailed analysis of Blanchot’s essay “Ars Nova.” She explains how Blanchot draws Adorno near through “subtle modulations, indirect distinctions, and minute divergences” (16), all of which place Adorno at a proximate distance from Blanchot’s own ideas. In their discussion of the “new music” of Schönberg et al., both Blanchot and Adorno converge on the idea that this music “epitomizes modernism’s break with aesthetic and cultural conventions” (X-REF 000). However, Liska demonstrates the way in which Blanchot rejects “the dialectical interdependency of art and its times” (17), a claim that characterises much of Adorno’s work. She shows how the power of this music, for Blanchot, is not located in the idea of “newness” but its ontological potency that “has the power to unmask the illusions of culture and open up a deeply unsettling but more authentic existence” (22). Liska conceives of this abstract, a-historical/a-cultural, modality through the idea of the *diabolical*. Through this idea of the diabolical, Liska situates the significance of music in terms of literature.

In “White Noise, *Écriture Blanche*,” William Allen is similarity interested in a sound that falls outside culture and meaning but, contrary to Liska, music features only as a segue to the sonorous depths of Blanchot’s writing itself. Allen focuses on Blanchot’s writing in the 1950s, particularly his last *récit Le Dernier Homme* (*The Last Man*). According to Allen, this period is characterised by a monotonous, dirge-like quality. This dirge is described as a slow repetitiveness that leads eventually to a form of noise understood by Allen as an indistinguishable murmur where all individual sounds have given way to an indistinct sonic wash. The significance of this is a matter of the dead. Allen demonstrates how the dirge-like quality of Blanchot’s writing offers no release from the company of the dead like the traditional dirge but instead places us in endless proximity to them. It is on the basis of this unsettling noise that Allen distinguishes Blanchot’s writing from Barthes’s idea of an *écriture blanche* (blank writing).

Noise is one of the recurrent sonic themes in Blanchot’s work. Sometimes it
takes the form of a murmur, other times it is a rumbling, but in each instance Blanchot is trying to evince the underside of language that sounds beneath signification and meaning: “The word, almost deprived of sense, is noisy” (WD 52). It is this noise that gives inspiration to my contribution “Passive Noise.” I attempt to reframe noise as something different from its usual, cultural, commonsense attachment to negativity and violence by drawing on this Blanchotian idea of noise as well as his idea of passivity. Using Japanoise as a case study, I distinguish between active and passive noise, where the latter relates to what Blanchot understands to be the anarchic region of art that refuses to allow the work’s meaning to be located. The aim is to show how the recent inertia that has gripped Japanoise (experimental noise music from Japan) is in fact indicative of the inexhaustibility of its form. Broadly speaking, then, this essay teases out some sonic features of Blanchot’s work and draws on a number of his terms to reframe the contemporary art form Japanoise.

Stefanie Heine does something similar in “Aesthetic Autophony and the Night: Blanchot, Kafka, Kimsooja, Burial” but her approach is rhizomatic, exploring the articulation of Blanchot’s nocturnal sounds across different media. Heine takes her cue from the aural descriptions located in Blanchot’s discussion of Kafka’s The Burrow, where in the deep nocturnal spaces all one can hear is oneself. It is from this that Heine develops the idea of “aesthetic autophony.” Like the experience of hearing one’s own breath, Heine turns her ear to the buried, often unheard, aspects of diverse works of art. She explores the resonances between Blanchot’s nocturnal sounds and Virginia Woolf’s novels Jacob’s Room and The Waves, Kimsooja’s installation To Breathe: Bottari, and Burial’s track “Nightmarket.” By turning her ear to these nocturnal sounds, Heine gives voice to the sound of inspiration in Blanchot’s work.

In her discussion of Burial’s “Nightmarket,” Heine describes how the listener is lured into the nocturnal space of the work where “voice and words are swallowed by breath” (70), where the sounds of individual voices dissolve into the indiscernible sonics of anonymity. What is left is a speaking voice, a call, a breath, uttered by no one. It is this impersonality of sound that interests William Large in “Affects, Indexes and Signs: Will Oldham and the Authenticity of the Voice in Popular Music.” Large takes up the theme of authenticity but in a manner unrelated to its typical use. He looks at authenticity through the themes of impersonality and anonymity. For Large, it is this version of authenticity that is important because it is what enables popular music to resist commodification. Using the singer-songwriter Will Oldham as a case study, Large explores the idea of affect with reference to Spinoza, Foucault and Pierre Schaeffer. The question of whether or not Will Oldham is authentic is answered in the context of affect. This amounts to disentangling affects from signs and indexes in the hope that one might hear the impersonal sound of the voice. It is at this point that Large draws on Blanchot’s idea of literature where one confronts a language that is neither owned nor spoken by anyone. There are resonances with Allen’s piece as Large looks to hear the rumblings that insist beneath signification.

In light of these suggestions of an anonymous, impersonal sound, spoken and heard by no one, one is left wondering about the nature of this experience. François J. Bonnet starts his reflection by asking this question. In “Dispersion in Sound,” translated by Alain Toumayan, he asks “What, precisely, does the experience of the dispersal of the self signify? Can one truly experience such a dispersion in sensory terms […]?” (88). He begins by considering this idea of self-dispersion as it is presented in the opening passage of Thomas the Obscure but his aim is to consider how listening to music might result in a “decentering of the self” (89). What Bonnet’s piece playfully disrupts is the cultural indexes of music in the hope of considering
music as “given” (89) where it is encountered as a porous sensory flux. This is not, for Bonnet, a final point to be reached but a matter of becoming brought about by the incessant oscillation between “listening-reading” and “listening-exploration” (91). By drawing on Blanchot’s views on language and literature, and the irresolvable paradoxes that constitute them, Bonnet appeals to the dissemination of the self in the act of listening.

In Greg Hainge’s “Blanchot and the Resonant Spaces of Literature, Sound, Art and Thought” the question of the relationship between the listener and auditive event is taken up in the context of sound art and the consideration of space. Hainge draws on Alvin Lucier’s and Bernhard Leitner’s work to account for the transformative nature of the interaction between space, sound and the visitor in sound-installation works. Hainge does not simply map Blanchot’s account of literary space onto this but explores the theoretical transformative potential of considering Blanchot alongside Lucier and Leitner. This amounts to, in part, a teasing out of what he feels to be the latent ethical/political dimension in Blanchot’s early-to-middle period works. Hainge’s contribution draws attention to another sonic reference in Blanchot’s work: the idea of resonance and reverberation, which appear in The Infinite Conversation, is how Hainge articulates the “coterminous” (103) reality of the work and its visitor/reader/listener/viewer.

The attempt to unfold Blanchot through contemporary works of art is continued in Paul Hegarty’s “In the Absence of Noise, Nothing Sounds: Blanchot and the Performance of Harsh Noise Wall.” Hegarty discusses Blanchot’s interpretation of Mallarmé’s Un coup de dés jamais n’aboli\[
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\]er le hasard in proximity to harsh noise wall music. There are similarities between my piece and Hegarty’s in that we both identify noise as an important concept and event when considering the excessive nature of emptiness and absence in Blanchot’s thought. Hegarty, however, hears harsh noise wall (and not Japanoise) as the sound most akin to Blanchot’s thoughts on language and literature. He suggests this music is a “current attempt to complete a history of moves within noise music” (114) and one that approaches, through its invariable sonic excess, the absent neutrality of the literary work. In his analysis, Hegarty pays attention to the oscillation between the possible and impossible that occurs when art approaches the limit of meaning.

Leslie Anne Boldt also considers the parallelism between Blanchot’s work and twentieth-century composition and sonic experimentations. In her article “The Call of the Disaster at the Borderland of Silence,” she firstly explores what she describes as the crisis of ocularcentrism and the role sound plays across Blanchot’s works. Boldt then draws our attention to a plethora of auditory instances and their significance, reminding us of the deep sonority in works like Thomas the Obscure and Death Sentence. After establishing the role of sound at the point of disaster, she then considers how various musical works similarly approach a limit where the listener encounters a barely distinguishable difference between silence and sound.

It is toward the voice and the mythic dimension of sound in Blanchot’s work that David Appelbaum, in “Sonic Booms in Blanchot,” directs our listening. Appelbaum accounts for the importance of sound in the philosophies of Heidegger and Levinas through to Blanchot’s work where he shows the important role that sound, particularly of the voice, plays in Blanchot’s contestation of philosophy. The voice that interests Appelbaum, and Blanchot as Appelbaum reads him, is not the singular voice of the subject but the sound of the outside and other, heard as an “infinite interplay of voices” (154) in proximity to the siren’s song and Narcissus’ relationship with Echo. In his discussion of the latter, Appelbaum revisits the theme of
ventriloquism, where the voice is heard displaced from its origin. Through this theme he is able to approach the idea of a bottomless sound and, in his own unique way, bring us back to the recurrent theme of a sound emitting from nowhere, by no one in particular and heard as a limit experience.

Early in Appelbaum’s contribution, he highlights the importance of Blanchot’s pronouncement, “Speaking is not seeing” (147) in regard to the “displacement of vision, as the grand narrative of knowledge” in favour of a more auditory experience captured by rhythm and the “auditory image” (147). This quotation also plays an important role in Jeff Fort’s piece “Rumors of the Outside: Blanchot’s Murmurs and the Indistinction of Literature.” Fort unearths a letter written by Blanchot to a young filmmaker keen on presenting a short film based on a section of Death Sentence. In responding to the request Blanchot is reminded, and reminds the filmmaker, about the chapter from The Infinite Conversation, “Speaking is Not Seeing,” and he draws on this to express his “apprehension” of seeing “the written pass into the visible” (162). But Blanchot is also resigned to the fact this transformation is inevitable in some form. This is a key moment for Fort as he looks to explore the convergence of the indistinct murmur of language, what he calls the “sonic image” (161) and the banality of public speech mediated by mass media. What is so captivating in Fort’s piece is this way he draws the murmur of language, its originating source, toward a kind of indistinct noise generated by mass media and technology. This enables a consideration of how Blanchot might be read/heard now, in an increasingly technologically mediated world.

What should be clear from these introductions is that the reader will hear echoes, resonances and reverberations across and within the contributions. Sounds and their thematic treatment will often repeat but with each reoccurrence a new kind of sound and listening occurs. This is why Charlie Blake closes this collection, with his affective, experimental “Orpheus and the Vanishing Note: Xenosonics, Katabasis, Daemonotechnics,” because his piece, through the themes of da capo and ostinato, is an invitation to a ritualised repetition. Not only does Blake emphasise the importance of repetition as a way into Blanchot’s “broken ontologies” (X-REF 000), near the end of his piece he invites us to return to the beginning and read aloud in order to hear/not hear the sounds of the outside. In this piece, Blake revisits the theme of xenosonics and in doing so pulls us toward a kind of subterranean listening. Blake’s invitation, then, might be interpreted more broadly: to read Blanchot again and to listen again to those sounds and musics on the borderland of meaning and to thematise, hear and imagine their reciprocity.

notes

1 For a detailed account of this change, see The Blanchot Reader edited by Michael Holland. In the introduction to each of the four parts of the collection, Holland charts the change in Blanchot’s thought. He suggests that Blanchot’s early work is characterised by a late Romantic/radical symbolist sentiment. Blanchot withdraws from the political sphere into the imaginary mode of art. However, as Blanchot becomes more politically engaged, eventually returning to politics in 1958, it is precisely from this imaginary mode of art and the fraught tensions within in that he thinks the political. In short, literature becomes a springboard for politics rather than a site of retreat.
Liska has explored the relationship between these two seemingly distinct figures elsewhere. In “Two Sirens Singing: Literature as Contestation in Maurice Blanchot and Theodor W. Adorno” she examines their views on literature by considering how they both treat the story of Odysseus.

In his text In His Voice: Maurice Blanchot’s Affair with the Neuter, Appelbaum explores this theme and the idea of “dummy talk” extensively.

abbreviations

IC The Infinite Conversation.
SL The Space of Literature.
TO Thomas the Obscure.
WD The Writing of Disaster.

bibliography


