

'TOUCHED ECHO' – THE SENSE OF A GHOST

Morten Breinbjerg

In this article, I will discuss the urban art installation *Touched Echo*, by German artist Markus Kison, in order to reflect on the ghostly nature of sound, and how echoing sounds of the past – in this case, the sounds of the allied bombing of Dresden in February 1945 – interfere with both public and private life, with reality as history, that is, known, objective and factual, and as lived, that is, remembered and experienced.



Touched Echo, 2007-09, Markus Kison, Photo, Copyright Markus Kison.

Introduction

Sound unfolds in time, and disperses in space. It arrives from a distance, and resonates in the body of the listener. An ephemeral phenomenon, it disappears, but returns as an echo. Thus, sound represents what David Toop has described as the presence of an absence, [1] something that is and is not, something more than a spirit, but without a body; in short, a ghost.

In this article, I will discuss the urban art installation *Touched Echo*, by German artist Markus Kison, in order to reflect on the ghostly nature of sound, and how echoing sounds of the past – in this case, the sounds of the allied bombing of Dresden in February 1945 – interfere with both public and private life, with reality as history, that is, known, objective, and factual and as lived, that is, remembered and experienced.

The relationship between the remembered and the known, between the subjective experience and the historical fact upon which *Touched Echo*, touches and echoes today's political debate on this incident as either an act of war or an act of terror: a debate that concerns the city of Dresden as a haunted place, the land of ghosts. In order to qualify my discussion of *Touched Echo* and the ghostly nature of sound, I will draw upon Jacques Derrida's concept of 'hauntology', and Gaston Bachelard's poetic idea of the miniature.

The Spectre

In *Specters of Marx* (1993), the French philosopher Jacques Derrida criticizes the rather uncritical celebration of liberal democracy to which the end of the cold war, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and later, of the Soviet Union, led, particularly with regard to the 1989 article of Francis Fukuyama, *The end of history?*, where Fukuyama writes:

"What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." [2]

Derrida's goal is not to criticize liberal democracy, but to critique the whole idea of an 'end of history,' that is, the modernist idea of a final stage in human development – a kind of Utopia, perhaps? Therefore, his critique is also directed at Karl Marx himself, and the idea of communism as the basis for the ultimate and perfect society.

As the father of deconstruction, Derrida bases his critique on a single metaphor: The spectre, taken from the opening line of Marx and Friedrich Engels', *Manifesto of the Communist party of 1848*, in which they state:

"A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism. All the Powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies." [3]

Marx's and Engels' reference to communism as a spectre leads Derrida to examine the nature of this spectre, and the political power it wields.

For Derrida, it is evident that liberal democracy is not the answer to all the problems the world faces in the early 1990s, and to proclaim the end of history is merely a continuation of the historical ambition of exorcising the spectre of communism, to make the spectre disappear. But liberalism is not the only exorcist on stage, since communism also has the ambition to exorcise the spectre: not by making it disappear, but through the realization of a communist society, that is, to make the spectre present itself, to make it a living reality, something that is seen, and which occupies a place in history. Derrida believes that both strategies, the liberalist hope of making the spectre disappear, and the communist ambition of making it real, are totalitarian approaches, since both proclaim an end – an ultimate form of society.

However, Derrida holds that the spectre never dies, nor does it manifest itself. As the "visibility of the invisible," something which remains "beyond the phenomenon or beyond being," as Derrida describes it, [4] the spectre returns to visit us, and becomes what we, with a rather brute reduction might call a

'stone in the shoe' or a 'speck in the eye', somewhat as Wiki Leaks currently is to global power structures. Herein lies the spectre's political power, which, whether fearsome, mystifying, or alluring, enables or perhaps even forces us to reflect on the current state of society, and all powers' totalitarian potential.

In order to describe the nature of the spectre and its power, Derrida coins the term 'hauntology,' a neologism that, as an existing word in French, is inseparable from ontology. Hauntology represents a concept that describes the power of things that are present, but beyond being, and therefore nowhere to be seen: something that threatens to make visible what we forgot, or have tried to hide, something that leaves traces for us to see, and for others to follow.

The ghostly nature of sound

In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard discusses the concept of 'miniatures,' a concept he uses to describe how poetic expressions unfold a larger, imagined world. For an immediate understanding of Bachelard's idea, the miniature is a condensation of a cosmos wherein the unspeakable is spoken, silence is heard, and the invisible is visualized. It is an opening into the world beyond perception, through the poetic imagination of the poet. To exemplify the miniature, Bachelard quotes, among others, the Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz, and his writing on silence: "Listen – now there's nothing – but complete silence – listen." [5] Silence is somewhere on the border of perception, perhaps between perception and imagination. It cannot be fully experienced, but is easily recognized, and its presence opens a door into a larger imagined world that is both alluring and frightening.

In *Sinister Resonance* (2010), David Toop writes of how we find the world uncanny when sound stops, when everything is silent (a well-known, and often used effect in movie production). One reason that we experience silence as both fascinating and frightening might be that silence is a condensation, a concentrated moment full of potential energy, or, to put it more poetically, a miniature of an unleashed cosmos – a withheld Big Bang.

In keeping with the writings of Toop and Bachelard, silence is like a ghost, and qualify as a miniature; a poetic imagination beyond perception, simultaneously appealing and terrifying, as are the auditory hallucinations of Edgar Allen Poe that find their way into his uncanny story, 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' a story that Bachelard discusses in 'The Poetics of Space.' Or, as Toop mentions in 'Sinister Resonance,' when, late at night we seem to discover a hidden world from the subtle noises that suddenly make themselves heard, when we become uncertain of what we are hearing, or whether we are hearing anything at all.

'Touched Echo'

Touched Echo by German artist Markus Kison, was a public sound installation at the *Brühlsche Terrasse*, in the city of Dresden in 2007. The installation presented the sounds of the allied bombing of Dresden on February 13th 1945, using original recordings of bombers flying over the city, and exploding bombs. The sounds were hidden as vibrations in the railing running the length of the terrace. The listener had to place his/her elbows on the railing, and rest the wrists on the skull, in order to hear the sound, which then resonated through the bones of the forearm, to the cranium. The posture of the listener resembled that normally taken in order to avoid listening. This is no coincidence, but, as Kison noted, a feature of

the artwork, since it is a posture one can imagine the victims of the actual bombing taking, in order to shield themselves from the horrifying sounds of the aircraft and the exploding bombs. See Fig. 1.

In the context of haunted places and spectres, it is interesting to notice how the sound in *Touched Echo* is not really 'on air', but only in the head of the listener, as is the case with schizophrenics or those experiencing auditory hallucinations. Murray Schafer, the soundscape theorist, has introduced the concept of 'schizophonia' [6] to denote the split between an original sound and its electronic, acoustic reproduction that, as a free-floating media object, is detached from its original time and space, but which may be reproduced at other times and places. As 'schizophonia,' the electronic, acoustic reproduction of the bombing of Dresden enters the present as an echo of WWII, and becomes a medium through which the historical and present time and space reach each other. It is truly the presence of an absence, something that is and is not, a spectre, as Derrida's constant reference to Hamlet, in *Specters of Marx* indicates: 'to be or not to be.'

Although the sound is only heard in the listener's head, the installation immediately enters the public sphere, in the sense that it also echoes today's political debate on the incident as an act of war, or an act of terror. As a spectre, it brings the historical act into political discussions of the present. Today, and most recently with regard to the 65th anniversary of the Bombing, in 2010, conflicts arose between neo-Nazi demonstrations and counter-demonstrations of local citizens and left wing activists, a conflict that showed how the city is a haunted place, and how the incident resonates in the memory of the people and the history of the city, as an echo or a voice from the past that will not die away, but keeps coming back.

In Greek mythology, Echo was a nymph who used her beautiful voice to distract Hera, the wife of Zeus, when he enjoyed the company of other beautiful nymphs. When Hera discovered this, she punished Echo, so that Echo from that day forth was only able to repeat the words of others. However, as we know from our own acoustic experiences, Echo does not only repeat the words spoken by others: Her voice is a distortion, and as such she manages to once more have a voice of her own, a voice that is not to be trusted, that exists between the real and the imagined, the truth and the lie.

Conclusion

Touched Echo exists on the border of the perceived and the imagined, the real and the staged, the private and the public. Although it is a sound installation, there is nothing to hear, since what is there is only in the head of the listener. But where does the actual recording stop, and the auditory hallucination start? What is the difference between memories and historical facts? These are some of the questions *Touched Echo* asks, without answering, and in this uncertainty lies the poetic imagining of the work, and of the ghost and the miniature, an imagining beyond perception that is needed by both people and the places in which they live, but also, if we care to listen to Derrida, by the societies we build. If we are to avoid totalitarianism, the end of history, we must accept the poetics of the ghost, whether what we experience is a dream or a nightmare. That is, we have to find a way of living with the ghost (the good and bad of history, the fact and the lie, the sound and its echo) without making it disappear or become real.

"Haunted places are the only ones people can live in" Michel de Certeau writes in *The Practice of Everyday life*, [7] but some places still need to be exorcised, in order to become habitable. How to do that, without being totalitarian, that is the question.

References and Notes:

1. David Toop, *Sinister Resonance* (New York & London: Continuum International, 2010).
2. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," in *The Geopolitics Reader*, ed. Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby & Paul Routledge (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 114.
3. Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Selected Works, Volume One* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 108.
4. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York & London: Routledge Classic, 2006), 125.
5. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 179.
6. R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape – The Tuning of the World* (Destiny Books, 1994).
7. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1988), 108.