

# The Secret of Sound in Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to discuss and ask questions about the role and meaning of sound and voice in the constellation of language, writing, speech and listening in philosophy. I will reflect this in the thinking of two post-war philosophers and great literary voices both sensitive to sound: Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). I would like to introduce a sense of sound existing on the outskirts of experience in silence, folding almost as a secret, that is inspired by Alice Lagaay's notion for the need of *philosophy of voice*. Especially in the landscape of (writing a) disaster interrelations between art and philosophy become the most visible addressing ways of meaning and meaning-making, experience and ontological presumptions behind any storytelling and writing. What could sound mean for philosophy?

**KEYWORDS:** Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, sound in philosophy, holocaust.

## 1. Introductions are

acts to bring something into existence. In the case of no introduction, a being is called nothing, it comes from nowhere, it has no relation to time nor space, it is merely a stranger, standing legless in the crowd.

When introduced, a negative *no* becomes a positive *yes*.

When introduced, a name resonates in the room, from lips to lips that slowly get familiar with its key in the mouth.

And when introduced, a voice has its turn to speak,

but it may prefer silence.

## 2. As we all know, in silence

there is suddenly sound everywhere: the multitude of sounds seem appear to a silent places that would otherwise be covered by other sounds. Silence, after all, is the moment when the listening begins, as Salomé Voegelin so eloquently writes. (Voegelin 2010, 82–82.)

Maurice Blanchot lived and worked in silence. He was just as notoriously reclusive as J. D. Salinger or Thomas Pynchon during his lifetime:

*To write (of) oneself is to cease to be, in order to confide in a guest – the other, the reader – entrusting yourself to him who will henceforth have as an obligation, and indeed as a life, nothing but your inexistence.*

[Italics included in the original quotation.] (Blanchot 1995, 36.)

Not much is known about him – except for his writings. However, no matter how hard he tried to make himself vanish and to give space for *the text itself to speak*, it is the silence of his voice that make his words to ring even louder. Although absentee from philosophical circles of his time, apart from active correspondence with close friends, the reason we still remember and discuss Blanchot is because of the likes of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Lévinas, Gilles Deleuze and Paul Auster, who have all been deeply influenced by his writings and have professed to his legacy.

For me, Maurice Blanchot's voice is clear, but it is not obvious. My personal fascination started at a failure not only to read, but to 'use' him. One cannot merely enter into a dialogue

with him, he simply does not discuss in questions and answers, or even arguments and concepts as is accustomed in philosophy. One has to read him differently. However, this does not mean that Blanchot escapes philosophical thinking, logic or even meaning – he simply calls for different means to it. He is not reinventing language used in philosophy, but rather rearranging it anew and making philosophical thinking inseparable from poetics. This is also the reason why I've chosen practice-based artistic research as my way to approach his thinking on the phenomenology of the outside and method of *writing a disaster*. As a theorist, I would rather try to sing his thoughts, than to cage them to mere concepts. I am currently writing and directing a radio play on Finnish Civil War (1918) together with documentary film director Katja Lautamatti where theory reflects on the artistic writing process, but does not dictate it (and vice versa).

In this paper, I've chosen to take Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot as a starting point to reflect and to open a discussion about the role of sound and voice in philosophy, especially in understanding the experience of impossibility and limits of representation discussed in the after-math of 1945 in Europe. There is a strong connection between the two thinkers: they are not only contemporaries (although Blanchot belongs to a previous generation), but they developed their own ambitious literary approaches to philosophy. For both it was clear that thinking and writing are inseparable – that thinking happens through writing – and philosophy through writing otherwise,

and in the end, there is more to writing than meets the eye alone.

### 3. "I've no words; my voice

is in my sword!" says Macbeth before fighting Macduff, the figure of truth in the deceitful, disastrous world of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606). Throughout the play Macbeth's voice carries out a negative act; in the beginning of the play he lies about a murder, and finally with these *non*-words, his voice becomes the instrument of death itself.

Although a rather personal perspective on writing in philosophy, I have often feel limited by it in my studies and later in my research in art theory. In its worst it resembles a little like Macbeth's sword; raised high against language, charging for the truth, cutting through sensitive nuances, excesses or tropes that would interfere with a *concept* that is often defined to exhaustion and has lost all its lived qualities. On the other hand, I would not like to turn philosophical discourse into an art experiment either – it needs consistency and rigour. However, there is a demand for a discourse that can contain both the rational and the lived, philosophy and art, not as opposing, but parallel voices. In this, Maurice Blanchot is an inspiration.

After reading Alice Lagaay's talk on voice in philosophy, and her emphatic question on *the place* of voice in philosophy, I felt intrigued. In her talk she made a demand for a concept for sound that would extend beyond its resonance. This kind of *philosophy of voice* would "resonate and echo into and beyond silence". (Lagaay 2011, 7.) I see this kind of voice to create an important soundscape where sound would not only interfere with conventions of writing, but, if taken seriously, could actually introduce new aspects, even a set of topics in philosophy. Instead of asking what is sound or voice in philosophy, should we ask:

what philosophy could be?

#### 4. Sound, although veiled,

has never been completely hidden in philosophy. Quite contrary, thinkers from Socrates and Plato to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger have given much consideration to music, sound and tonality of a voice.

In his method of deconstruction Jacques Derrida turned his attention towards ears as oppose to eyes, making questions of voice and sound essential for example in his three key texts from 1967: *Of Grammatology* (De la grammatologie), *Speech and Phenomena* (La Voix et le Phénomène) and *Writing and Difference* (L'écriture et la différence). In his short essay "Tympan" Derrida investigates ear and incorporates elements of art to a piece of philosophical writing where different voices begin almost to bleed onto each other. However, in *Glas* (Glas, 1974) his attempt to incorporate sound to writing is in its most experimental: 'glas' means a bell, and throughout the book a sound of bells is tolled to interfere with language.

Without a doubt deconstruction has taught people how to read and listen texts in a new way, and revealed multitude of voices behind univocality as well as demanded more broad take on sound and hearing in general as discussed also by Lagaay (Lagaay 2011, 2–3). However, after many openings and attempts to reach sound, does Derrida get any closer to giving it a place in philosophy?

Byung-Chul Han has argued that in the end, Derrida's ear is a deaf one: it hears no sounds and it is silent. In philosophy ear resembles inwardness, closeness and subjectivity, and Han follows to argue that philosophers in general may ultimately embrace a certain deafness as more objective and truthful way to hear (Han 1997, 5–7,10). Also Lagaay points out how Derrida writes in *Speech and Phenomena*:

Isn't the dream or the ideal of philosophical discourse — ... — to make tonal difference inaudible, and with it a whole desire, affect, or scene that works (over) the concept in contraband? Through what is called neutrality of tone, philosophical discourse must also guarantee the neutrality or at least the

imperturbable serenity that should accompany the relation to the true and the universal. (*Speech and Phenomena*, quoted in Laagay 2011, 3.)

In philosophy, the ideal discourse takes place in neutral tone and unwavering serenity that would connect it to truth and universality. Any traces of singularity of a voice, its tonality and audibility are connected with something disrupting not only unity, but its possibility to truthful meaning. In this constellation sound is treated as a disruptive element that causes interruption and fragmentation. Gerald L. Bruns demonstrates similar displacement, or non-placement of sound by quoting Emmanuel Lévinas:

To see is to be in a world that is completely here and self-sufficient. – ... – In sound, and in the consciousness termed hearing [audition], there is in fact a break with the self-complete world of vision and art. In its entirety sound is a ringing, clanging scandal. Whereas, in vision, form is wedded to content in such a way as to appease it, in sound the perceptible quality overflows so that form can no longer contain its content. (Bruns 1997,106.)

Bruns continues: “Philosophy has no place for sound. Sound is foreign. It is always outside the world, threatening to invade it, like anarchy” (Bruns 1997, 106.). Either always too inside or outside, too much or too little, as either noise or silence, sound does not seem to find its way to philosophy in sensing and making sense of the world as such. Andrew Hass argues through Hegel and Derrida that sound has a half-way nature: in sound there happens a conversion where an exterior turns into interior, a physical into ideal, and they finally disappear into each other. According to Hass, this is however the way also art influences philosophy. (Hass 2014, 103–104.) Whereas eyes seem to construct and build, ears convert: maybe sound is in philosophy as much a visitor as it is an intruder,

bringing about secrets beyond such a limit that *philosophy itself cannot contain*.

## 5. Can it be called philosophy if

it does not even try to communicate? Can it be taken seriously? Or is it some sort of anarchy? Destined to be dismissed as something obscure?

Both Derrida and Blanchot profess to the demand of neutral, even absent voice behind language in their writing, however, they seem to differ in terms of their relation to affect in and within language. As Derrida points out, the aversion in philosophical discourse is not aimed towards sound alone, but also towards affect and desire, strongly relating to the experience of sound. In other words, it can be seen that affect interferes with communication.

Against this notion it is easy to start to see radical, even anarchic qualities especially in Blanchot's writing of philosophy.

Outi Alanko-Kahiluoto speaks of phenomenology of reading in Blanchot as something opposing the classical theory of Roman Ingarden's phenomenology of literature: "for Blanchot reading is not a subjectivist act, but turns from consciousness to affection, and from perception to fascination" (Alanko-Kahiluoto 2010, 173). This impersonal logic of sensation is essential in understanding Blanchot's writing where two things come together: the demand of the neutral in philosophy and the unyielding fascination of literature. Unlike Derrida, the first and foremost ambition of Blanchot is not communicating meanings and truths, or communication at all, but to relate philosophical thinking to writing and language in a way that language itself starts to speak,

or as I hear it: to *resonate*.

One of the places to review Blanchot's turn away from philosophical unity and truth towards poetics, 'resonance' and affection takes place in his book on holocaust: *Writing of the Disaster* (L'Écriture du désastre, 1980). It is a work of the literary genre that, in its own terms, cannot exist: how to write something that is indescribable? The profound problem of narrating holocaust is not in the indescribable, unspeakable horror alone, but in its nature as testimony, as a secret – and to give voice to those destroyed. Even Primo Levi, a witness par-excellence, a high-tuned listener of the camps who could afterwards play back even languages and dialects he himself did not speak, was destined to fail at it as discussed by Giorgio Agamben. (Agamben 1999, 16–17.)

Similarly this question of the impossibility of holocaust can be seen to start a crisis that inflicted all post-war philosophy: how to discuss something that defies all logic and is impossible to speak in terms of truth, knowledge, or wisdom? Do we need a new language for that? How to discuss secrets that philosophical discourse simply cannot contain?

## 6. "Every word is like an unnecessary stain"

on silence and nothingness" says Samuel Beckett in an interview. Blanchot's method of writing of the disaster owes much to Beckett's literary oeuvre. Beckett is the master of silence; activating in his texts not only different registers of language, but voices and movements of the speakers and the space around them. This is most apparent in his radio plays, where the surrounding space is silence and nothingness, and words float in the airwaves as if stains on that invisibility, revealing their emptiness as symbols. Only silence as a lack of dominant sound, and nothingness as a lack of image can offer a backdrop for language to be revealed

as it is – an airborne solid – where the meaning situates mostly in the air, not in the solid. It is no wonder how in silence we begin to hear things.

Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* is still a radical book of *philosophy*, and far more often passed as an obscure 'interesting' piece of writing than celebrated for its exploration of the limit of language. It is not an art piece, although, as Derrida puts it, it does mimic a piece of fiction: "(it) advances in the manner of work of art. Not as a work of art, but rather – which is not altogether the same thing – in the manner of work of art, perhaps by pretending to be fiction and thus as the fiction of a fiction." (Derrida 2000, 44.) In the book Blanchot activates the Beckettian silence in philosophy. He approaches the impossible topic of holocaust by making the form and the content relate to each other, in other words by placing on the same level *writing* and *disaster*, making them to be, and to become, the same thing. His fragmentary writing is writing at the limit: the experience of impossibility takes hold of language and its laws, rearranging its order to make it resemble something familiar, yet turning it inside-outside into something unrecognisable – into the experience of disaster itself.

The structure of the book fully coincides this double work: simultaneously creating a seemingly intact structure and then ruining it in an unseemly way. *The Writing of the Disaster* is notoriously difficult book to read – one Derrida calls to be "stamped with a black diamond like a musical note" (Derrida 2000, 44). Description is a good one: it is not a particularly long text, but it is extremely dense, affective and very much like a musical notation, where the textual weave is constantly leaking sensation beyond its writing. It is the very opposite way to write philosophy we have discussed: in this book it is the interference that constructs the view.

*The Writing of the Disaster* is, if not filled with sound, at least very much resonating. It creates a 'sonic environment' of a particular sort – a philosophical sort – a Beckettian sort – one that creates through a constant interruption of thinking a kind of a mute stammering, which I relate to the impossible speech of holocaust, and its silence. Hanna Meretoja has described a post-war subject standing "in the face of the incomprehensible" stopping to tell stories altogether. The experience of limitation and uncertainty can be seen as an experience of fragmentation, and even project the reduced agency of the subject in that way – without self-expression, identity, a cog in the machine. (Meretoja, 55, 57, 65, 92–93). This is a voice I would describe as no longer *who* but *what* that speaks, only belonging to human realm in half. It is the subject of concentration camps, still alive, but no longer speaking or reacting to the lived world. It is the experience of holocaust:

*The unknown name, alien to naming:*

*The holocaust, the absolute event of history – which is a date in history – that utter-burn where all history took fire, where the movement of Meaning was swallowed*

*up, where the gift, which knows nothing of forgiving or of consent, shattered without giving place to anything that can be affirmed, that can be denied – gift of very passivity, gift of what cannot be given. How can it be preserved, even by thought? How can thought be made the keeper of holocaust where all was lost, including guardian thought?*

*In the mortal intensity, the fleeing silence of the countless cry.*

[Italics included in the original quotations.] (Blanchot 1995, 47)

In the last line “*the fleeing silence of the countless cry*” Blanchot opens up a space of witnessing as a sound. In this sonic environment there is an opposition and rivalry of two sounds: a frail silence and a cry that is ‘too many’ and ‘too much’, pure noise. All this sound exists “*in the mortal intensity*”: not in meaning, not in thought, not in memory, not in names or words, but in the mortal body as *intensity*. It is the very definition of an affect and requires a different kind of a response from the language – even in philosophy. It is words speaking, and words alone, against silence and nothingness thus letting the outside of silence and nothingness to resonate in within and through them.

And if indeed a language can resonate,  
how about listening *The Writing of the Disaster* as a recording of  
impossible speech, or as a philosophy of voice?

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