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Listening to Listen: 
An Acoustemological Approach to the Short Film Listen

Abstract: With an acoustemological approach the article analyzes layers of audible perception and communication in Listen – not only between the characters but also in relation to its reception by the audience. The focus is on different points of audition, modes of listening, and qualities of voice.

Keywords: Soundtrack, acoustemology, point of audition, audio graph, voice, communication

Introduction
The very title makes you prick up your ears, and the first minutes of total silence further intensify the expectation of sound and create a kind of ear cleaning which tunes the listener in to give the short film full aural attention (R.M. Schafer, 1969). After a minute the title LISTEN is shown, and half a minute later the intensified silence is finally released by a sigh followed by the thin, vague, and trembling voice of the mother.

In this article I take an acoustemological approach to Listen. Inspired by anthropologist and linguist Steven Feld, I understand acoustemology as a theory of the cognitive potential and experience of sound.

“Acoustemology is an auditive cognitive theory/theory of knowledge or theory of what and how we experience through sound, through listening and other auditive practices – currently and historically, collectively and with respect to the individual human being, as well as in constant interaction with our other senses”. (Have et al. 2008, 1)

As we state in An Acoustemological Manifesto cited above, this ability to assimilate, express and reflect sound is a basic human tool for orientation in the world. I will use this tool throughout the article and make some acoustemological, analytical picks in the audiovisual context of Listen. First I will discuss the shifting points of audition (POAs) and show the general development in the intensity of sound volume during the 13 minutes. Then I will focus on the communicative qualities of the mother’s voice in the first part of the film. The last section will gather the threads by discussing inclusion and exclusion in relation to communication.

Narrative shifts in point of audition
The first part of Listen is composed as a cyclic structure, with layers of information being slowly added by changing the POA (Altman 1992) with regard to the different characters. And in each cycle the dialogue is pushed a little further in time.
The model reflects an understanding of a subjective POA emerging when the audience’s experience of the dialogue is visually anchored in one/some of the characters (see table) and we hear it with their ears and minds, so to speak.

The cyclic structure intensifies an emotional tension carried by the repeated sentences, nervous breathing and voice of the mother. Even though she is talking about terrible things, her nervousness and fear are communicated most strongly through the acoustic qualities of her voice. The attention to the voice qualities becomes even more significant for listeners who (like the police officers in cycle 3) are not able to immediately decode the Arabic language.

At 04:30 (scene 3, shot 4) – where it is revealed that the translator is cheating and lying – the cyclic structure is replaced by a teleological structure. From that point onward, a traditional conflict-driven plot replaces the emotional, cyclic tension and the experience of a POA is less significant. An exception is scene 4 (at 05:25), where the soundtrack changes from the dialogue in the office to electronic, distorted music mixed in the forefront of the soundtrack. At the same time, the setting changes to the corridor, where the son Yussuf is playing with a ball. The POA is anchored when we recognize the earbuds in Yussuf’s ears (scene 4, shot 2) and hear the muffled voice of the policewoman at a distance filtered by the music. This is a classic example of how *acousmatic* film music (Chion 1994) is visualized and thereby perceived by the audience first as off-screen non-diegetic and then on-screen diegetic music. For a short moment the audiovisual composition here takes the audience into the head of Yussuf, but as soon as he pulls out his earbuds we are back in the less specific POA. When Yussuf talks to his father on the telephone a few moments later, we no longer hear the voice of his father as Yussuf hears it (scene, shot 5a+b).

The audio graph below shows the general development of intensity of the sound volume during the 13 minutes of the film. It illustrates how the soundtrack in itself creates a narrative development by visualizing the long periods of silence at the beginning and end of the film; the three similar cycles in the first four minutes; the sequence with the electronic music beginning at 05:25; and the intense sonic climax building up from around 09:00 with increasingly loud voices all speaking at once, suddenly getting silent when the policeman shouts “STOP!” (09:46). The graph has been produced by converting the soundtrack of *Listen* into an mp4-file and then transforming it into a visualization by using the software Wavepad. Included with the permission of Valeria Richter, producer.

### Cycles of repeated dialogue spoken in Arabic in the trembling voice of the mother (including scene 1 to scene 3, shot 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle 1</th>
<th>Mother in gray burka</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Not visually specified Audience's POA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 2</td>
<td>Translator with hijab</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Translator's POA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 3</td>
<td>Police officers in uniform</td>
<td>(None)</td>
<td>Police officers' POA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Voice as multi-layered communication
In this section I will discuss the communicative qualities of the mother’s voice in the three cycles in the first four minutes. In my acoustemological reading of Listen, the film displays layers of semantic and emotional decoding by asking: How is meaning constructed and signs (mis)interpreted when we do not understand the linguistic language spoken and are prevented from access to facial expressions and body language? Then we only have the voice to listen to, and without other expressions to disturb us, we are actually able to be extra attentive to the many communicative layers in the voice of the mother: the rhythm, pitch, diction and breathing. In her book For More than One Voice, philosopher Adriana Cavarero differentiates between orality and vocality. Orality refers to voice as a bearer of language, and vocality to qualities and values that belong to voice as such (Cavarero 2005: 9). Cavarero is interested in what a voice does, not what it is, focusing on voice as a performative act in itself. In Listen the voice of the mother communicates qualities like ethnicity, age and gender and creates an effect of authenticity or intimacy (Have & Pedersen 2016). But the trembling, thin, tearful voice in a stammering rhythm in high pitch also performs anxiety, perplexity and vulnerability.

From a broader sound perspective, sound designer and theorist Michel Chion differentiates between different modes of listening that can be linked to the experience of the voice of the mother. Like Cavarero, he differentiates between semantic listening (the linguistic way of decoding a language, demanding that the listener knows the codes and structures of the specific language system, in this case Arabic) and reduced listening (focusing on sound itself or, in Cavarero’s terms, the vocality of the voice, independent of its cause and of its linguistic meaning). In the first circle, in which we only see the mother covered by a gray burka, the vocality of her voice has strong communicative power and appeals to a reduced mode of listening – especially for non-Arabic speakers. The subtitles express semantic meaning for English readers but are not experienced through sound. In the third non-texted cycle the reduced listening mode is most profound for non-Arabic speakers, but because of the previous subtitles the audience already knows what she is saying. But because the POA is anchored in the policemen the emotional layers are still strongly communicated through the vocality of the mother’s voice.

Inclusions and exclusions of communication
As demonstrated in the short acoustemological picks made above, the short film Listen questions layers of audible perception and communication on many levels
– not only between the characters in the film, but also in relation to its reception by the audience. More specifically, I will argue that the film questions inclusion and exclusion in relation to (audible) communication. *Listen* performs what happens with our perception when we hear a voice but are excluded from communication because we do not have the skills to decode the language. Then we begin to listen to the vocality of the voice, which enhances a sensibility to emotional aspects. Like music, these qualities speak a more universal language than a linguistic language and are therefore more inclusive. Other examples of blocking of expression are the mother’s burka, which prevents the policemen from registering facial expressions and body language, and Yussuf’s earbuds, which exclude him (or protect him) from the voices around him, as we experience in scene 4.

By changing the point of audition in the cycles in the first part of the film, *Listen* also points to the fact that aural communication is poly-semantic and decoded differently. Decoding and understanding depends on and is delimited by the listener’s point of audition in a broad sense.

**References:**