What the Thunder Said

Four Short Meditations in which Christian Marclay Is Not Mentioned Once

Tom McCarthy

1. Persephone

This is the name of the chapter, the fifth in his memoir/fiction/treatise *Scratches* (1948), in which Michel Leiris describes listening to his father's Edison graphophone. Not gramophone – he's precise about the difference – but *grapho*-phone: a contraption whose wax cylinders retain traces of the vibrations carved in them by the registering stiletto, 'helicoid' marks, strange sketches, drawings that turn into sound. Or the other way around: sounds that turn into drawings. What makes the device appear miraculous to the young Leiris is that it can serve this double-function, 'depending on whether one used it to plough the sounds into the depths of the wax or to make them rise up again – ripe grain or resuscitated cadavers – from the long trench that had been thus hollowed.' Whence *Persephone*: the daughter of Demeter/Ceres (law-giving goddess of agriculture; she who, Ovid tells us, 'first to break the earth with plough the manner found'), who is captured and interred by Pluto/Hades, then delivered up from earth again – but only provisionally, for a short stretch, every year, her two-way shuttle-journey between life and death set, like a CD or mpeg, to *Repeat*.

But there's another hook for the title, too, a second reason why, as Leiris puts it, 'the subterranean name of *Persephone*' has been 'extracted from its dark terrestrial depths and lifted to the heavens of a chapter heading'. For him, this name's two parts call to mind the syllables that in French designate the earwig, *perce-oreille*, the piercer of our phonic membrane, whose burrowing inside our ear canals and subsequent disturbance of our brains was thought for centuries to cause those mental picture-and-word collages, or cartoons, known as dreams. The graphophone's effect on Leiris Junior is no less invasive, no less physiological, 'digging a bed reaching

from the acoustic layers hidden in the depths of the wax all the way to the great sea of the ear' and injecting through this channel 'unexpected cracklings [...] shocks [...] sudden starts of surprise [...] What exploded in the sound box and seemed bound to split its transparent wall was therefore an autochthonous thunder [...] a din that was the interior fulguration of a fragment of matter here present [...] a molecular sort of fire from heaven.' In this 'auricular breach', he writes, 'I was penetrated by the mineral world, that is, by what seems to me most irreducible and alien'.

Rainer Maria Rilke, too, describes the first time he was introduced to sound recording. It was by his high-school science teacher, who showed rapt pupils how to stick to the small aperture of a funnel-rolled cardboard sheet a piece of impermeable paper to which, in turn, a clothes-brush bristle was affixed – a low-tech, DIY version of Leiris Senior's Edison that, transferring onto and replaying from a wax-coated roll the pupils' voices, confronted them with 'a new and infinitely delicate point in the texture of reality'. What the adult Rilke recalls most about the experiment, though, is not the tinny sound spilling from the funnel on replay, but rather the squiggly material inscriptions on the rolls: *these* are what return to his mind forcefully a decade and a half later when, studying medicine, he contemplates the suture running down a human skull. A thought experiment follows: 'What if one changed the needle and directed it on its return journey along a tracing which was not derived from the graphic translation of sound, but existed of itself naturally [...] along the coronal suture, for example? [...] A sound would necessarily result, a series of sounds, music [...] what variety of lines, then, occurring anywhere, could one not put under the needle and try out?'

The skull-track, Rilke claims, is just an 'example', the incidental trigger for these thoughts: a table, say, or pavement or the trunk of a tree would serve the point just as well. But it's not a table or a tree trunk that he picks to make it: like Hamlet, he turns to the skull. The fulcral point for his deliberations, the skull places them – and, by extension, the question of sound and drawing, or the drawing of sound, indeed the whole question of the texture of whatever reality is anchored around or balanced on this delicate point or juncture – once more firmly within the radius of death, the realm of Hades.

2. *ssiiiii*, *ffiiii ffiiiii*

Consider the World War One aerial observer. Positioned near the rear of a two-seater aeroplane, facing (like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History) backwards, these young men (they were all men) would read the battlefield that slipped out from beneath their tail like paper issuing from a printer. It formed a rich text, track-scored by trenches and supply lines, pockmarked by bombardment, punctuated by batteries each of which was designated by a letter, either on the map that the observer held or on the ground itself – in Popham Strips, large canvas lines laid out in the formation of an E, or A or F so as to be legible from high above. Two maps, two drawings, then: the one sketched on the paper and the one the earth had been turned into. The sky, too, was scrawled over, transformed into a mesh of intersecting lines, angles and intervals: vapour trails, missile trajectories, smoke puffs. The observer had a radio set: he'd tap out Morse-code letter sequences, which hurtled down towards his battery, into its operators' ears, instructing them to tweak their firing elevation, redraw a shell's arc – thus making the observer both a reader *and* a writer, viewer *and* artist, active transformer of the canvas in which he was inextricably caught up.

While English humanist poets (Owen, Sassoon, etc.) mourned the pathos of destruction, showed bucolic bugles calling from sad shires to men whose bodies had been penetrated by inhuman geometries, the Futurists saw in these very episodes (destruction, penetration, the new geometries' ascent) a radical, exhilarating over-throw of all the staid rules governing aesthetics, visual perspective, poetry, mankind itself. In each banked turn and nosedive of a warplane, space is re-hinged, horizons unfolded, torn, relaid along multiple new axes; 'panoramic fragments' become

'a continuation of each other, bound together by a mysterious and fatal need to superimpose their forms and colours, while conserving between themselves a perfect and prodigious harmony'; reason is 'abandoned to vertigo'; smoke-streaks, bundles of electric light offer themselves as brushstrokes; 'crucibles of barite, aluminium and manganese' send 'blinding explosions' to the terrified clouds. As the machine gun's eloquence drowns the muffled, tepid shepherd's horn, sound gains a new importance – but sound liberated from the chains of sentiment and logic. 'It is not necessary to be understood', writes Marinetti; instead, we should make use of every noise surrounding us, amplify, in and as poetry, its violence, abandon syntax, collide words together – *man-torpedo-boat* – use onomatopoeia: *ssiiiii*, *ffiiii ffiiiii*...

The next wave of Anglophone writers may not have identified directly as Futurists, but the overhaul is stamped on their work just as indelibly. In particular, the logic and aesthetic imposed by the wireless. What is T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* but a long trawl through the spectrum, with voices, songs, fragments dislodged from other contexts dropping in and out? (Its year of publication, 1922, is the one in which the BBC was founded.) What is Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* if not a tuning in to a range of modulating frequencies, their drawing together in a disembodied polylogue (and what 'waves' are we talking about anyway?)? James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (the name of whose protagonist, morphing across the band, is given variously as 'Persse O'Reilly' and 'Earwicker') is up-front about its radiophonic nature, showing us 'loftly marconimasts from Clifden' beaming 'open tireless secrets [...] to Nova Scotia's listing sisterwands', a 'contact bridge of [...] sixty radiolumin lines [...] that lionroar in the air again, the zoohoohoom of Felin make Call'. The schizo-acoustics to which Shakespeare's Caliban was subject, by which he was so enchanted – air full of noises, sounds and sweet airs, a thousand twangling instruments humming about his ears – have, encased in new technology, become the driving force of art. Shakespeare seems to have anticipated this; why else would he have called the sounds' transmitter 'Ariel'?

3. Two times. I repeat...

In Rilke's 'First Sonnet to Orpheus' (also written in 1922), the Thracian poet's singing has the effect of constructing a receiving temple in our hearing. In Jean Cocteau's 1950 cinematic version of the myth, the poet is himself a listener: he tunes into a car radio set, picking up looping text-fragments transmitted by another poet from the Underworld, which Cocteau figures as a bombed-out urban landscape, a waste land. *The bird sings with its fingers. Two times. I repeat: the bird sings with its fingers. Three times.* Orpheus transcribes these cryptic found sequences (which, it turns out, are themselves stitched together from other sources), then re-sets and publishes them. Cocteau got the idea from the *'radio anglaise d'occupation'*, the Second-World-War transmissions over the BBC from British secret services to their *Résistance* counterparts: they took the form of short, looping poetic phrases, most of which had no particular significance; one in every five-or-so hundred, though, was code for *Cut the power lines; blow the bridge up; assassinate the General.* In London, a man or woman reads a line of verse into a microphone; in France, a bridge blows up. Or not – each line has that potential, that double-capacity.

Each time I watch Cocteau's film, I think of Hergé's Tintin, crouched over his radio set, picking up and copying down encrypted messages transmitted on illicit frequencies by conspiring villains. 'What can it all mean?' he asks. In Tintin's world, sound is a weapon too; his friend Professor Calculus invents great ultrasonic mirrors capable of destroying cities; showcasing his new Calcacolour Television set, the Professor not only assails his viewers' (and the readers') visual field with jags and zigzags, Richter blurs, he also infuses the air (or page – they are the same) with Marinettish words-in-freedom: 'DIGADOG DAGADIGADUG DOGODOGDO DAGODAGODAGODUG...' By the last, unfinished album, *Tintin et l'Alph-Art*, we see Captain Haddock holding up and scrutinising a giant *H* – language completely reified.

For the Lettrist Isidore Isou, words could be *ciselé* like marble, hacked at and recombined like the layered posters that his followers would create new artworks from by tearing into them, setting each layer's letters and images in dialogue with those printed on another. For William Burroughs, language was a virus; for Kathy Acker, it was something cut into your body – for both, something also you can hack and recombine to crash the control systems of the earth, which, being made up of code, are at base linguistic too. Words as weapons. Watching *Batman* on TV as a child, I always thought it was the words themselves, flashing across the screen during the punch-ups, the giant, lurid KA-POWWW!s and KER-THUNNKKK!s, that floored the Penguin's or the Joker's henchmen, not the fists from which they blossomed and erupted...

4. Tables of the Law (Remix)

Moses spoke with a stammer. Fire from heaven, or earth's repetition of it (repetition, that is, of what was repetition in the first place, round and round), is always full of crackle, interruptions, violence, noise. Tablets get shattered; things get reassembled differently, all lines remade. That is both the law's undoing and the law.

The last, or first, word goes to Joyce's thunder, which, appearing on the first page of his looping novel (thus after the final page too, replayed even when read or heard for the first time), bellows like Calculus's television set:

> bababadalgharaghtakamminarronnkonnbronntonnerronntuonnthunntrovar-rhounawnskawntoohoohoordenenthur – nuk!

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