

Cecchetto, D. (2022). *Listening in the Afterlife of Data. Aesthetics, Pragmatics, and Incommunication*. Duke University Press.

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The arrival of the review copy of David Cecchetto’s *Listening in the Afterlife of Data. Aesthetics, Pragmatics, and Incommunication* (2022) in digital format attests to the widespread dissemination of digital communication technologies. It demonstrates the significance of Cecchetto’s insistence on listening to the incommunicative, the (in)significant ‘subtones’ spreading throughout the afterlife of data. The book proposes an expanded view of listening as a methodological approach for interrogating human-technology couplings at a time when digital technologies are still unreservedly viewed as enhancing interaction despite a rising suspicion of data validity. Cecchetto’s critical research practice highlights the agential intertwinement that the distributed attunement of listening enables for gaining access to these contemporary posthumanist experiences.

The book’s initial inquiry on how to “listen to computers in their incommunicative profiles?” (Cecchetto, 2022, 1) correlates the author’s key notions of sound, communication, and data to bring forth their obscured interrelationships. For Cecchetto, obscuring the seemingly obvious is a conceptual tool for excavating subtler or overlooked nuances. Similarly, because not all vibrations are immediately perceptible, divergence or inconsistency contributes to the definition of sound as obscuring features. Such unsung qualities are also traits of the two main concepts of communication and data. Each book chapter clarifies key terms from sound studies, the field of computational communication system analysis, technosonic time-mechanisms practices, and works from Cecchetto’s creative research practice or artworks from the field.

An essential reference frame for the author’s research arises from Patricia Ticineto Clough’s quantum theory-influenced take on measuring (2018), which asserts that the determination of influencing effects is inherently limited. Cecchetto’s conception of listening as a method avails such apprehension due to listening’s intrinsic attention “to the effects of a reality the cause of which can never be singly determined” (2022, 99, 110). Methodologically taking on such disposition diminishes the opposition between theory and practice but is bolstered by the research’s theoretical grounding in pragmatism. These choices allow Cecchetto to bring forward the instant feedback of what-how couplings (2022, 4), which pragmatically prolong any communication into an excess of its interactive exchange. Doing so facilitates the development of enactive paradoxical movements that do not explicitly expose the underlying digital processes but unveil their general (un)availability through the resulting artifacts and symptoms.

The book addresses critical aspects in general references to the systemic white patriarchal dominance rather than specifically delineating norms and structures transported in coding through

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zeros and ones (Benjamin, 2019). Cecchetto's main point of reference is the critique of neoliberal and biopolitical influences established through what Robin James (2019) discerns as the 'sonic episteme'. His interest focuses on the abstraction methods employed throughout the sonic and their entangled manifestations in contemporary technological development. Aesthetic practice, therefore, provides a way of listening as a material-semiotic practice that engages with the socio-technical relationality of the world. Cecchetto endeavours to avoid the delusional and distancing aspects of critique that is only concerned with the real but never attuned to it (2022, 13, 102). While such a take contains objectionable positivist elements, the distributed attunement of listening (differently) is consistent with this conception.

Chapter one scrutinises the medium specificity of sound, particularly in networking projects. Through one example (*Exurbia*) from his early collaborative research practice, Cecchetto defines the positionality of his sonic pragmatism in "the incommunicative dimensions of sound in their absolute nonuniversality" (2022, 32). Thus, beginning with determining what is termed musical as a rhetoric of music, Cecchetto legitimises what can pass as music by transposing Rosalind Kraus' term 'the expanded field' from the visual arts (1979). However, he dismisses the early attempts by artist and composer John Cage to expand what counts as silence, discerning such practice instead as incorporation that is achieved "via a colonizing process that in no way addresses the discursive insularity that prevents music from avowing its contingency" (2022, 25). The problem of outlining the field of music that can only qualify as arbitrarily limited or as tautologically framed through the discursive qualities of sensitive experiences reveals here an inherent paradox that such discursiveness always includes "extradiscursive" experiences" (2022, 32).

Asking what it would mean to listen differently sets the second chapter's focus upon a research project that simulates extended listening experiences (*Fathead*) by amplifying micro experiences in delay and volume, bringing them to the forefront of conscious perception. Cecchetto is most interested in the human-technical coupling, which, in this case, incites an experience of a simultaneous "incommunicative continuity [of] conscious and nonconscious thinking" (2022, 52). The experiment thereby allows the detection of entanglements and incongruencies, which aggregate in incommunicative technicities, producing their specific (often neoliberal) forms of knowledge.

Chapter three delineates computation's integral incommunications in digital audio as crucially based on the general working mechanics of computational machines. Taking an excursion from the early cybernetic definition of communication as "the interactive computation of a reality" to the definition of computers as grammatical machines, Cecchetto draws attention to the computational inflected linearity causing time dependency ("time-criticality") as a result of the mechanical procedures of (classical) algorithmic logics (2022, 63-66). This insight evokes the original findings made by Alan Turing about the incomputable, prompting Cecchetto to track the logico-mathematical studies of computation—a trajectory the computational researcher Beatrice Fazi nowadays pursues towards onto-aesthetic speculation. Fazi's research suggests that the discretisation at the core of computing entails an ontology of its own. In her words, one that is not sensible or phenomenal but rather indeterminate, contingent, respective to the infinitesimal formalism of computing (Fazi, 2016).

The following chapter, presents several algorithmic artworks that predominantly engage in sonification, thereby underscoring specific ways to employ digital technoculture creatively. Additionally, Cecchetto analyses projects that already reference an extended listening scope that can be activated to make the "unavailability of aesthetic" access knowable (Cecchetto, 2022, 89). However, works that favour a definition of algorithmic 'creativity', an interpretation that inherits a



‘computational dispositif’ in generalising terms, are limited by the inherent ‘time-criticality’, the specific technicity the earlier chapter has outlined. As a result, further selected examples of computational artworks employ an aestheticized human-technology coupling that actualises a potential’s unavailability by rendering extrasensory insight available. As Cecchetto emphasises, these posthumanist actualisations do not depict the workings (or glitches) of “digital processes, but rather [expose] artifacts and symptoms of them” (2022, 95, 98).

Cecchetto’s research concentrates on the general technicality of human-techno-couplings and its resulting specificity while acknowledging *de facto* that computational technicality is inextricable from socio-political concerns. This positioning allows the author to discern that the transposition of data and sound through a computational dispositif of knowledge constitutes an in communication between listening and computation. Evaluating (measuring) the process of listening on an unaffectedness of (an impossible) pure data transposition, despite the current devaluation of data, neglects the specifics of human-machine couplings. Listening, Cecchetto thus reminds, is not only a form of hallucination on a material level incited by the workings of the ear but also a collective imagination of meaning creation, as laid out in his definition regarding the rhetoric of music. As earlier emphasised, listening always entails some selective process, undermining deterministic interpretations, thus attributing an incommunicative package to signals. As such, the paradox of the inherent incommunicative in communication undoes the idea of unaffected forms of listening.

If chapter four excavated the facticity of the available but inaccessible potential that can be made perceptible in human-machine couplings, then chapter five compares these experiences to hallucinations and potential dreams. As the second key term for accessing listening beyond technology-based interpretations, aside from hallucinating, dreaming draws post-computationally on the expanded concept of listening evoked through its attuned distribution.

The book proposes an affirmative approach to research in experimental media that excavates the implicit logic of algorithmic data procession. Focusing on intersections where the sediments of computational mechanics inform contemporary ways of knowing (listening), the author explores modes to make them perceptible (available). The ubiquity of entangled technicity is unavoidable in Western modernity; thus, the book attempts to discern the incommunicative along the fault lines of its inescapable positioning. Despite its theoretical background, the research operates along the felt impact of listening intensely. Rather than specifying singular aspects of perceiving the incommunicative, the book traces artifacts and symptoms that become apparent in engaged interactions of distributed attunement, offering an explorative approach to the expanded field purported of posthumanism.

Listening in the Afterlife of Data is an essential read for artists and scholars interested in digital theory and engaging with and through sound in the field of practice-based research who want to assess information technology in a pragmatic-critical way.

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