

Misophonia: Towards a Taxonomy of Annoyance

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Abstract

This is the second post in Sounding Out!'s 4th annual July forum on listening in observation of World Listening Day on July 18th, 2015.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Sound Studies and Aurality (Topic), Experimental and Cognitive Psychology (Subfield), Article, Disability Studies, Listening, Medicine, Radio



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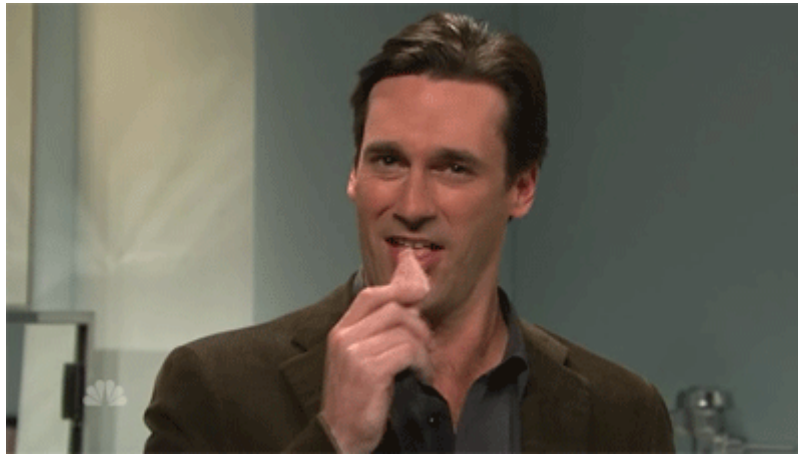


This is the second post in *Sounding Out!*'s 4th annual July [forum on listening](#) in observation of World Listening Day on July 18th, 2015. World Listening Day is a time to think about the impacts we have on our auditory environments and, in turn, their effects on us.

For *Sounding Out!* World Listening Day necessitates discussions of the politics of listening and listening, and, as **Carlo Patrão** shares today, an examination of sounds that disturb, annoy, and threaten our mental health and well being. **–Editor-in-Chief JS**

An important factor in coming to dislike certain sounds is the extent to which they are considered meaningful. The noise of the roaring sea, for example, is not far from white radio noise (...) We still seek meaning in nature and therefore the roaring of the sea is a blissful sound. Torben Sangild, [The Aesthetics of Noise](#)

When hearing bodily sounds, we often react with discomfort, irritation, or even shame. The sounds of the body remind us of its fallible and vulnerable nature, calling to mind French surgeon [René Leriche's](#) statement that "health is life lived in the silence of the organs" (1936). The mind rests when the inner works of the body are forgotten. Socially, sounds coming from the organic functions of the body such as chewing, lip smacking, breathing, sniffing, coughing, sneezing or slurping are considered annoying and perceived as intrusions. A recent [study](#) by [Trevor Cox](#) suggests that our reactions of disgust towards sounds of bodily excretions and secretions may be socially-learned and vary according to whether it is considered acceptable or unacceptable to make such sounds in public.



However, for people suffering from a condition called [Misophonia](#), these bodily sounds aren't simply annoying, rather they become sudden triggers of aggressive impulses and involuntary fight or flight responses. Misophonia, meaning *hatred of sound*, is a chronic condition characterized by highly negative emotional responses to auditory *triggers*, which include repetitive and social sounds produced by another person, like hearing someone eating an apple, crunching chips, slurping on a soup spoon or even breathing.

The consequences of Misophonia can be very troublesome, leading to social isolation or the continuous avoidance of certain places and situations such as family dinners, the workplace and recreational activities like going to the cinema. While rate of occurrence of new cases of Misophonia in the population is still under [investigation](#), the fast growing number of online communities gathered around the dislike of certain sounds may indicate that this condition is more common than previously thought.

But why do people with Misophonia feel such strong reactions to trigger sounds? This fundamental question remains up for debate. Some audiologists suggest these heightened emotional responses can be explained by hyperconnectivity between the auditory, limbic and autonomic nervous systems. However, we continue to lack a [comprehensive theoretical model](#) to understand Misophonia, as well as an effective treatment to help sufferers of Misophonia cope with intrusive sound triggers.



The Art of Annoyance: is it possible to reframe misophonic trigger sounds as misophonic music?

Between 1966 and 1967, John Cage and Morton Feldman recorded four open-ended radio conversations, called [Radio Happenings](#) (WBAI, NYC). Among many topics, Feldman and Cage address the problem of being constantly intruded upon by unpleasant sounds. Feldman narrates his annoyance with the sounds blasted from several radios on a trip to the beach. Cage's commentary on the growing annoyance of his friend reveals a shift of perception in dealing with unwanted sounds:

Well, you know how I adjusted to that problem of the radio in the environment (...) I simply made a piece using radios. Now, whenever I hear radios – even a single one, not just twelve at a time, as you must have heard on the beach, at least – I think, “Well, they’re just playing my piece.”--
John Cage, Radio Happenings.

Cage proposes a remedy via appropriation of environmental intrusions. The negative emotional charge associated with them is neutralized. Sound intrusions no longer exist as absolute external entities trying to intrude their way in. They become part of the self. Ultimately, there are no sonic intrusions, as the entire field of sound is desirable for composition.

Cage's immersive compositional anticipated an important strategy to build resilience towards aversive sound: exposure-based cognitive-behavioral therapy, which proposes a gradual immersion in trigger sounds. And I suggest we can mine the history of avant-garde practice to productively further the idea of immersion; in the realms of sound poetry, utterance based music, Fluxus events and many other sound art practices, bodily sounds have consistently been exalted

as source of composition and performance. Much like Cage did with what he perceived as intrusive radio sounds, by performing chewing, coughs, slurps and hiccups, assembling snores and nose whistles, and singing the poetics of throat clearing, we may be able to elevate our body awareness and challenge the way we perceive unwanted sounds. In what follows, I sample these works with an ear toward misophonia, discussing their interventions in the often jarring world of everyday irritation.

https://youtu.be/40_236mWhSE

Oral Oddities

As pointed out by [Nancy Perloff](#), while the avant-garde progressively expanded to incorporate the entire scope of sound into composition, sound poetry followed a similar course by playing with the non-semantic proprieties of language and exploring new vocal techniques. The Russian avant-garde ([zaum](#)), the Italian futurists ([parole in libertà](#)) and the German Dada ([Hugo Ball's verse ohne Worte](#)) built the foundations of a new oral hyper-expression of the body through moans, clicks, hisses, hums, whooshes, whizzes, spits, and breaths.

https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/chopin_henri_les_mirifiques_02_les_pirouettes.mp3

Henri Chopin, Les Pirouettes Vocales Pour Les Pirouettements Vocaux

Sound poets like Henri Chopin created uncanny sonic textures by only using 'vocal micro-particles', revealing a sounding body that can be violent and intrusive. [François Dufrêne](#) and [Gil J Wolman](#) brought forward more raw and glottal performances.

Bridging the gap between the Schwitter's Dada-constructivism and a contemporary approach to sound poetry, Jaap Blonk's inventive vocal performances cover a wide range of mouth sounds. In the same vein, Paul Dutton explores the limits of his voice, glottis, tongue, lips and nose as the medium for compositions — as can be heard on the record [Mouth Pieces: Solo Soundsinging](#).

https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/paul-dutton_03_lips-is_2000.mp3

Paul Dutton, Lips Is, Mouth Pieces: Solo Soundsinging

Fluxus: Eat, Chew, Burp, Cough, Perform!

The Event is a metarealistic trigger: it makes the viewer's or user's experience special. (...) Rather than convey their own emotional world abstractly, Fluxus artists directed their audiences' attention to concrete everyday stuff addressing aesthetic metareality in the broadest sense. [Hannah Higgins, Fluxus Experience](#)

The emergence of Fluxus is strongly linked to Cage's 1957-59 class at New School for Social Research in NYC. George Brecht's *Event Score* was one of the best known innovations to emerge from these classes. The *Event Score* was a performance technique drawn from short instructions

that framed everyday life actions as minimal performances. Daily acts like chewing, coughing, licking, eating or preparing food were considered by themselves ready-made works of art. Many Fluxus artists such as [Shigeko Kubota](#), [Yoko Ono](#), [Mieko Shiomi](#), and [Alison Knowles](#) saw these activities as forms of *social music*.

For instance, [Alison Knowles](#) produced several famous Fluxus food events such as [Make a Salad](#) (1962), [Make a Soup](#) (1962), and *The Identical Lunch* (1967-73).

<https://vimeo.com/36770058>

Also, Mieko Shiomi's *Shadow Piece No. 3* calls attention to the sound of amplified mastication, while Philip Corner's piece [Carrot Chew Performance](#) is solely centered in the activity of chewing a carrot.

https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/flux-tellus_11.mp3

Philip Corner, Carrot Chew Performance, Tellus #24

In **Nivea Cream Piece** (1962), Alison Knowles invites the performers to rub their hands with cream in front of a microphone, producing a deluge of squeezing sounds:

https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/fluxsweet-05_nivea_cream-1962.mp3

Alison Knowles – Nivea Cream Piece (1962) – for Oscar (Emmett) Williams

Coughing is a form of love.



In 1961, the Fluxus artist Yoko Ono composed a 32 minute, 31 second audio recording called *Cough Piece*, a precursor to her instruction *Keep coughing a year* ([Grapefruit](#)). In this recording, the sound of Ono's cough emerges periodically from the indistinct background noise. The *Cough Piece* plays with the concept of time, prolonging the duration of an activity beyond what is considered socially acceptable. While listening to this piece, Yoko Ono brings us close to her body's automatic reflexes, pulling back the veil of an indistinct inner turmoil. Coughing can be a bodily response to an irritating tickling feeling, troubled breathing, a sore throat or a reaction to foreign particles or microbes. In response, coughing is a way of clearing, a freeing re-flux of air, a way out. *Coughing is a form of love.*

https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ono-yoko_cough-piece_1961.mp3

Yoko Ono – *Cough Piece*

COUGH PIECE

Keep coughing a year.

1961 winter

Sonic Skin

In the work *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Sigmund Freud stated that *the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations*. The psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu expanded this idea by suggesting that early experiences of sound are crucial to consolidate the infant's ego. The *bath of sounds*

surrounding the child created by the parent's voices and their soothing sounds provides a *sonorous envelope* or an *audio-phonic skin* that protects the child against ego-assailing noises and helps the creation of the first boundaries between the inside and the external world. The lack of a satisfactory sound envelope may compromise the development of a proper sense of self, leaving it vulnerable to invasions from outside.

It's no surprise that conditions like Misophonia exist and are very common among us, considering how important our early exposure to sound is in building our sense of self and our sensory limits. For Misophonics, the everyday sounds we make without even thinking about them can be the source of a fractured and disruptive experience that we should not dismiss as the overreactions of a sensitive person. During the month we observe World Listening Day, our discourse usually praises the pleasures of listening and tends to focus on the sounds that soothe rather than annoy. However, conditions like Misophonia show us that there is much more that needs to be said on the subject of unpleasant sound experience. I can't help but notice a disconnect between the vast exploration of annoying and irritating sounds in the avant-garde and the critical discourse in our sound communities that is dominated by the pleasures of listening. Cage's call to embrace intrusive sounds urges us to consider all sounds regardless of where they fall on the spectrum of our emotions. For all of us who would consider ourselves philophonics, let's create a critical discourse that addresses the struggles of listening as much as its pleasures.

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Thanks to Jennifer Stoever for the thoughtful suggestions.

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Carlo Patrão is a Portuguese radio artist and producer of the show *Zepelim*. His radio work began as a member of the Portuguese freeform station *Radio Universidade de Coimbra (RUC)*. In his pieces, he aims to explore the diverse possibilities of radiophonic space through the medium of sound collage. He has participated in projects like *Basic.fm*, *Radio Boredcast*, and his work has been featured in several international sound festivals and has also been commissioned by *Radio Arts (UK)*. He is currently working on a radio show for the Portuguese national public radio station *RTP*. In addition to his work in radio, he has a master's in clinical psychology.

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