

**Don Ihde: Listening and voice.
Phenomenologies of sound (2nd ed.).
New York: State University of New York. 2007**

Ansa Lønstrup

MedieKultur 2010, 48, 136-138

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | www.smid.dk

The online version of this text can be found open access at www.mediekultur.dk

Don Ihde is best known in the media and information science and research milieus for his work on the human body and technology. His first edition of *Listening and Voice. A Phenomenology of Sound*, published in 1976, was so “before its time” that many of us, who, then and still today, are involved in sound (and media) studies, probably never got to read or know about it at that time nor got hold of it in the 30 years that followed. In Jonathan Ree’s outstanding book from 2000, *I See a Voice*, Ihde’s book is mentioned, though only in a footnote (Ree, p. 52, note 1): “For a superb discussion of auditory attention, see Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice. A Phenomenology of Sound* (1976)”. Jonathan Ree is – like Don Ihde – a philosopher.

Subsequent to the first edition of *Listening and Voice* (1976), the author changed the subtitle to *Phenomenologies of Sound*, as well as updated and rewrote it, adding some new chapters concerning the newest (digital) sound technologies, new music and new hearing devices.

I would highly recommend that anyone interested in sound, and especially methodology for studies and analyses in sound, should read this new edition of the book. The reasons for that recommendation are many, but foremost, the original first 19 chapters are the most path breaking and inspiring as well today. In the new chapters of the book (the last 4), the author mostly provides evidence that he is still up-to-date in the field of sound, music, technology and listening, whereas neither the methodological depth nor the analytical outcome are overwhelming here.

Don Ihde's book does not primarily examine the sounding human voice – but is much more focussed on auditory perception and attention in particular towards “voice”, or more precisely: with the phenomenology of listening and voice as a connected whole or entity. So his concept of voice is not restricted to the human voice. It concerns the voice of all things that make or produce sound in our listening activities:

Listening to the voices of the World, listening to the “inner” sounds of the imaginative mode, spans a wide range of auditory phenomena. Yet all sounds are in a broad sense “voices” of things, of others, of the gods, and of my self ... A phenomenology of sound moves ... toward full significance, toward a listening to the *voiced* character of the sounds of the World (Ihde, 2007, p. 147).

Ihde's methodology is primarily based on Husserl and Heidegger. Central is the *epoché*, the phenomenological *reductions* and *bracketing* (that is, the reticence or modesty which should be consciously activated and present towards the so-called “natural” attitude to the world). Ihde views these phenomenological methods as “a means of gradually approximating a certain stratum of experience ... a beginning which, through both the deconstruction of taken-for-granted beliefs and the reconstruction of a new language and perspective, becomes a prototype for *a science of experience*” (2007, p. 18).

The issue of finding a new language for the auditory experience is for Ihde foremost a question of avoiding visual metaphors, and here he draws on Heidegger:

This Heideggerian expansion from musical phenomena is one which in turn points back to that methodology. In the Heideggerian model, with its concepts of “call”, “silence” and the “voice (of conscience)”, the fundamental thing that occurs is a thinking with roots in auditory metaphor. To follow the implications and pathways from that metaphor as a shift from the traditional visual metaphors of our philosophies may open a new direction for Western thought. (Ihde, 2007, p. 223)

Ihde writes about the distance that emerges between the *centre* of experience and the *horizon* as well as the *polyphony* of experience. For Husserl, the centre of attention and of all experience is *intentionality* – *our choice of focus* or that essence of experience to be directed toward, to be “aimed at” (Ihde, 2007, p. 18). For Heidegger and Ihde, the *horizon* (border) of sound is silence and the concentrated attention-direction of listening is a “Gesture toward *silence*”. Thus gesturing towards silence enhances *listening* (Ihde, 2007, p. 222).

Finally, I should mention Ihde's listening method in experiencing the *shape*, *the surface* and *the interior* of things put into motion by human or nature's agencies (activities). And last but not least is Ihde's characterisation of the general *field-shape of sound* as being both directional and surrounding: we hear (and maybe follow) the direction of sound as well as at the same time we are surrounded by sound. “The auditory field, continuous and full,

penetrating in its presence, is also *lively*. Sounds “move” in the rhythms of auditory presence ...The fullness of auditory presence is one of an “animated” liveliness” (Ihde, 2007, p. 82).

I have tried to use Ihde’s methodology in analyses of examples of contemporary sound- and voice art, and even without using all the concepts and principles in their entirety, I find Ihde’s method very productive and groundbreaking. The outcome of this phenomenological listening (or “phenomenologies of sound”) seems very cogent when accounting for the listening experience, with the use of auditory vocabulary, without falling into the trap of visual metaphors. “Doing phenomenologies” – which is Ihde’s own terminology – regarding my own listening experience it is thus possible to talk and write inside an auditory discourse after having listened to artwork and sound artefacts as “the things themselves”, whereby in the first listening I might have characterised those works by so-called “natural”, that is, visual-dominated metaphors and discourse.

Furthermore, Ihde’s very broad concept of voice could be the method or generator for establishing that “acoustemology” which American music anthropologist Steven Feld defines as “knowing and being in the world through sound” (Feld, 2004, “A Rainforest Acoustemology”, in *The Auditory Cultural Reader*). Ihde’s book suggests and proves in practice, through his many own “listenings” and examples, that if we stick to a listening focus and an auditory discourse in explaining our auditory experience we may avoid not only the trap of visual metaphors, but also the trap of overloaded, subjectivist (emotionalist) interpretations that enclose the meaning of the auditory experience into a private experience. The shared and semantic/semiotic open discourse of auditory experience is very much needed nowadays – perhaps especially in the media context.

Read this book – and conduct your own listenings and “do” your own phenomenologies of sound! And never mind that the book lacks a proper social-cultural (theoretical) framing. Most of us are capable of adding the latter ourselves if necessary.

Ansa Lønstrup
Associate Professor, Ph.D.
Department of Aesthetic Studies
University of Aarhus, Denmark
aekal@hum.au.dk