



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THE PANACOUSTICON: BY WAY OF ECHO TO FREDDIE ROKEM

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This essay has arisen as a direct result of reading Freddie Rokem's 'The Processes of Eavesdropping: Where Tragedy, Comedy and Philosophy Converge' (2015), which appeared in the first volume of this journal (2015). Here Rokem took as his point of departure eavesdropping scenes from plays, ranging from Classical Greek theatre through to Early Modern examples from Shakespeare and Molière, suggesting the existence of a liminal point between their tragic-comic aspects. The spectator in this fictional world, whether it is Phaedra, Polonius or Orgon, becomes a victim of her/his deed. Furthermore, philosophical discourse is coupled with the performance of eavesdropping as Rokem refers to the teaching of Pythagoras, the practice of theatre according to Plato and the writings of Walter Benjamin.

It is this moment of convergence between philosophy and performance practice that prompts my current response with regard to an act that occupies an acoustic space, a response that deliberately includes a figurative phrase within its title. I propose to extend this phrase to a performative level during the essay by constructing thematic 'echo chambers' that reflect on some aspects raised by Rokem and offer analogies with the world of the 17th century inventor, Athanasius Kircher's *Panacousticon*. In so doing, my intention is to lay emphasis on the oral event of philosophizing. Shifting back and forth between scenes of eavesdropping evoked by Rokem's examples and my own, I shall bring their subject matter into dialogue in the form of imaginary characters that rebound from each others' dramaturgical positions. The closet, the stone bust, the ghost, the automaton, the eavesdropper, the performer and the audience, will feature in different

acoustic 'spaces' according to their roles, thus enabling a discussion to take place between them within each structured constellation, as they listen to each other.

As a preliminary step I shall provide a historical context for the discussion of Kircher's work and draw some parallels with a number of his contemporaries as cited by Rokem. Beginning with a definition of the overriding theme that links the two, the word 'eavesdrop' refers to a conduit for water that allows it to drop from the eaves of a house after a rainfall. Its extended meaning, 'to overhear', stems from the practice of standing under an over-hanging roof or thatch to listen to conversations emerging from an open window (Oxford Dict. 1976). The acoustic source—the voice(s)—travel(s) downwards, with the eaves acting as a natural resonator. This curious practice led to the *Panacousticon*, one of a number of eavesdropping devices to be found in Kircher's two volume text, the *Musurgia universalis* (1650). His design comprised a surveillance system of courtyards and public spaces, in which every word could be overheard by means of spiral-shaped conduits embedded in the walls and ceilings of a building.

The 'talking heads' (shown on the R. of Figure 1) that functioned as eavesdroppers formed part of the entrance gallery to his *Museo Kircherianum*, established in the Jesuit *Collegium Romanum*, Rome, where they began 'speaking' whenever the visitors passed by. Examples of acoustic mechanical theatres that Kircher developed for construction were housed in the museum, together with

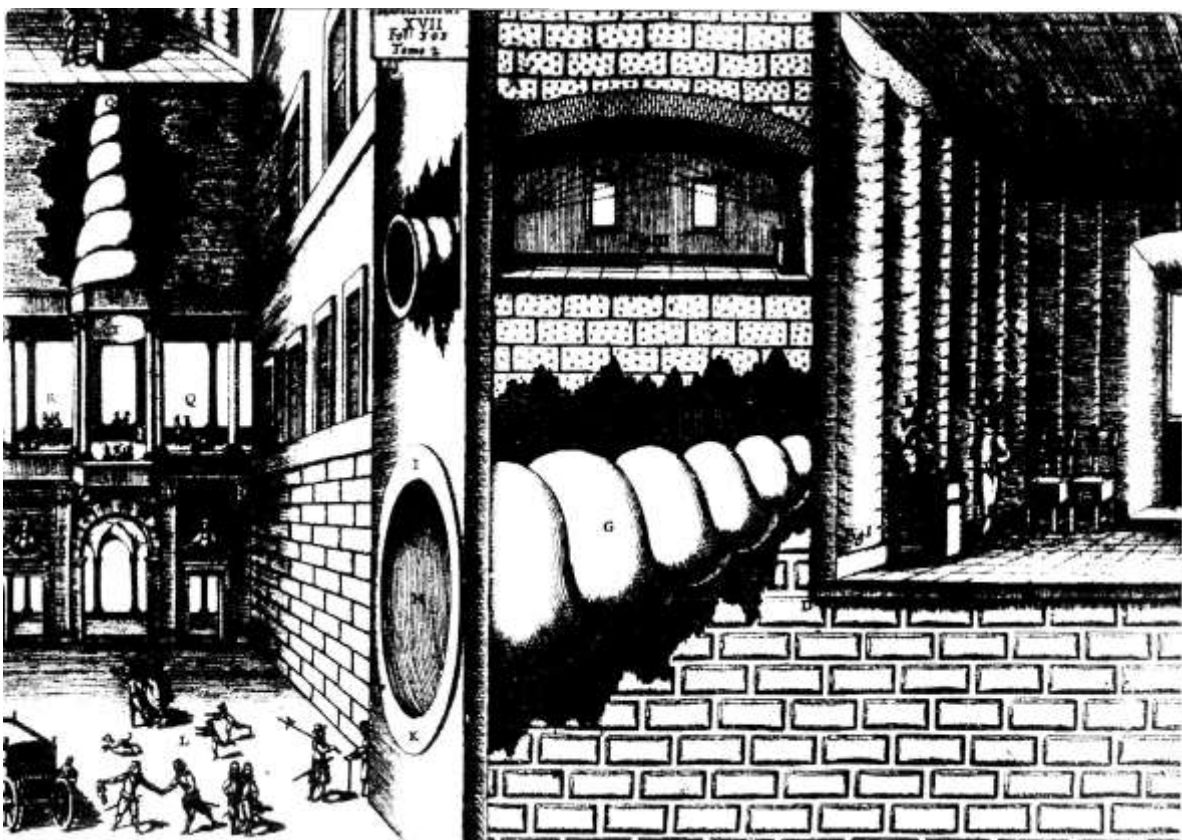


Figure 1: The Panacousticon from *Musurgia universalis*, Athanasius Kircher (1650)

audiovisual automata, optical/acoustic devices and numerous historical artifacts. Emerging from the tradition of the Roman College, he was one of the last polymaths of the 1600s to combine religion, philosophy and knowledge of nature into a single body of work. There seems to have been no division between his philosophical writings, diagrams, inventions and their actual realization in the form of contraptions that often took on a spectacular dimension in their staging. Thus the philosophical scholar was also a performer of his own concepts. This forms a direct parallel with Rokem's example of the philosopher and dramatist Plato in the latter's *Symposium* of 416 B.C. (Rokem 2015, 110); here philosophical discourse takes the form of a dramatic dialogue performed by several characters, in which the genres of tragedy and comedy are reunited in a radically new way. In both instances, from Plato to Kircher, performance and philosophy interact through the medium of theatre.

On a historical note, it is interesting to observe a timely parallel between Kircher's surveillance system the *Panacousticon* (1650), Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601) and Molière's *Tartuffe* (1664), the latter two plays cited by Rokem for their examples of eavesdropping scenes. Indeed, this device of dramatic tension became a convention in Elizabethan Theatre—with many of Shakespeare's plays containing such moments—and finds its source in the largely oral tradition of Italian *Commedia dell'arte* stemming from the middle of the 16th century (Riha 1990, 52). Such scenes of overhearing conversation were modelled on the real social and political intrigues that took place both in the court and in outdoor public spaces during this period, as well as within the supposedly private domains of the wealthy and powerful. Kircher transformed this subversive practice into an architectural form, recognizing at the same time its double capacity, when reversed, as a means of amplifying sound in order to stage spectacular sonic events. Primarily scientific in his interest, this construction of long conduits and huge funnels connecting vast areas within buildings was driven by an investigation into the art of acoustics and its laws. Furthermore, it was not his intention to use the device merely for acoustic spying, but also as a means of massive amplification, so that a concert of live music could be heard some distance away from the building in which it was being played (Zielinski 2006, 128).

The *Panacousticon* belonged to a whole series of bizarre mechanical theatrical wonders from the Baroque tradition that were constructed by specialists within the Jesuit order for stage performances and deliberately designed to captivate, as well as convert, their audiences. Thus Kircher found an ideal context for the realization of his mathematical and scientific knowledge, an application that was concerned with theatrics as a media tool for conveying a religious message. There is no doubt that Shakespeare was inspired by the theatrical tricks of an earlier counterpart to Kircher, John Dee, in the 1500s (Zielinski 2006, 130). Here natural science was put to the service of enchanting magical image machines that staged all manner of kinetic effects and confounded their public during performances of Dee's work in Oxford during the late 1540s (Zielinski 2006, 129). With such a level of technical perfection that concealed its *modus operandus*, the ground was laid for introducing elements of the uncanny into dramatic plays, of which eavesdropping, with its presentation of another reality, was to form a part.

The echo chambers

Entering now into the thematic echo chambers mentioned at the beginning of this essay, all—with few exceptions—acoustically interconnected via a labyrinthine structure, we note the presence of each character, whether animate or inanimate, and the potential thematic discussions that could ensue within these places of oral event. In addition to Shakespeare's closet (*Hamlet*), 'the point of origin for philosophical thinking' (Butler in Rokem 2015, 112), we might add other inanimate objects 'or some kind of screen' (Rokem 112), such as the table (*Tartuffe*), the door (*Hippolytus*), the curtain (*Rosmersholm*), or the attire of a costume disguise (*Euripides / Much Ado About Nothing*) as silent witnesses to the potential 'trouble' (Butler 1990) of an eavesdropping event. These spaces, in particular that of the closet, but even those fine layers between body and costume, become layered with the echoes of human voices and the silent presence of a human body breathing, listening, thinking. We can imagine such sites as retaining a history, a memory of all that has been heard or thought within them, like the famous example of Diderot's remarkable keyboard instrument that could recall all that had been played upon it: 'Do you understand any better the nature of motion, or the mode of its existence in bodies, or the manner of its transmission from one body to another' (Diderot [1769] 1966, 103)? The notion of *object-beings* contained within these sites springs to mind, objects that pose an existential question with regard to their potential capacity for thinking. Emerging from these echo chambers are overheard confessions, plots, intrigues, voices of seduction, anger, shouts, a physical invasion of the space occurring with the discovery of its occupant or, in *Hamlet*, the blade of a knife.

Located in proximity to such screen-objects is Kircher's stone bust with gaping mouth, one of many 'talking busts' that eavesdrops and reveals its 'heard' secrets by means of long, amplified conduits connected to the sound source. Its inanimate, seeming non-presence is uncanny and suggests a double role—that of both hearer and teller, a vehicle of transmission. According to Steven Connor our fascination with the powerful, the excessive and the uncanny is revived when sound is dissociated from its source and we become subject to a 'process of re-enchantment' through its invisibility, its 'magic artificiality' (Connor 2000, 40). As an example of one of the earliest forms of audio technology, Kircher's invention provided a model, demonstrating the effects of autonomous sound on the listener. Visually inanimate, the stone bust becomes sonically animated by means of an intentional acousmatisation or 'ventriloquism'. To expand on Butler's statement (in Rokem 2015, 112), perhaps the point of origin for thinking lies here in the space of a mouth that resonates with a voice but does not move, thus heightening our sense of hearing its 'thoughts'. In this particular echo chamber, we have to approach the talking bust closely, placing our ear in the proximity of the mouth in order to 'eavesdrop'.

Both the historically-laden and the uncanny aspects of these echo chambers are inextricably linked to those of the ghost and the automaton. Supernatural characters play a major role as eavesdroppers in Classical and Early Modern theatre as well as in Kircher's *Panacousticon*. Shakespeare implies the presence of a ghost, Hamlet's father, who has been listening throughout the closet scene, and who is finally manifested in a visible form. The ghost, represented as a restless spirit in theatre, finds echoes in the Catholic notion of purgatory, a highly dramatic 'place'

eminently suitable for a *mise en scène*, as Kircher was well aware. On a more contemporary note, Rokem cites the angel of Walter Benjamin (109–110), whose supernatural presence enables it to eavesdrop on history from its distanced position outside of time. An invisible presence alongside that of the visible protagonists in the play, the gods from the machinery of Greek Theatre—who reflect in turn a strong belief in providential interposition—retain an underlying role in the unfolding of events; even if, as Rokem observes, they are not able to fully control the consequences. Running parallel to Classical drama, the history of automata harks back to Greek mythology and the example of Daedalus, who used liquid mercury to set one of his moving statues into speech: hence the association with the world of supernatural beings. In Homer's *Iliad* the character Hephaistos describes his creation of an enormous 'giant' that pressed enemies of Crete to its smouldering, fiery iron breast and destroyed them (Homer 1951, 478–608).

Perhaps automata in their human form could be also be regarded as representing victims of purgatory, the space after life, in which they are caught by an endless repetition of chastisement. Some were even constructed to enact the moment of death by dagger, for example, the wooden limb or head falling from the body in a seeming flow of blood, and then re-constructing itself anew.¹

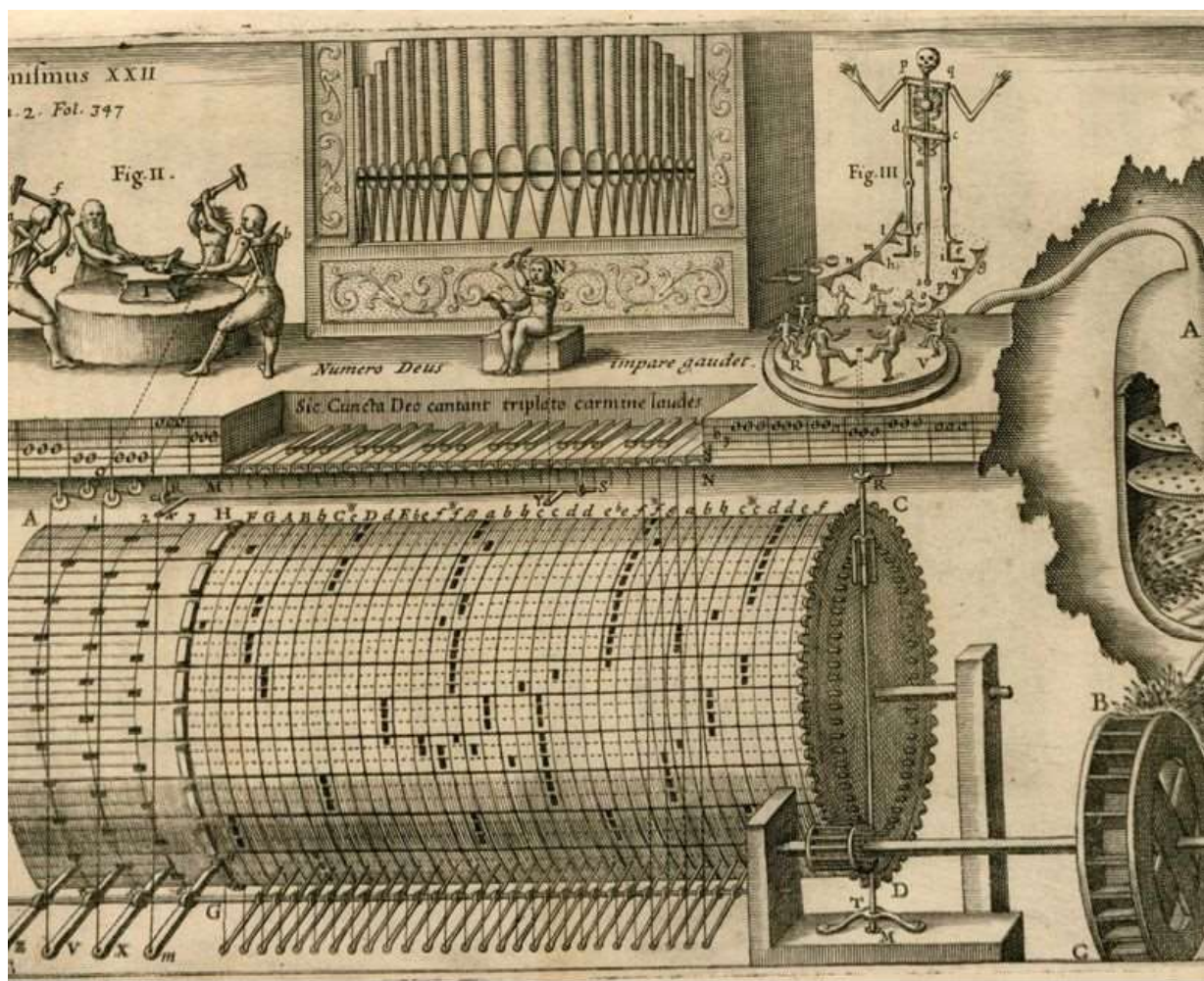


Figure 2: Organ from Athanasius Kircher's *Musurgia universalis* (1650).

An early example of a music automaton, the hydraulic organ of Kircher's *Musurgia universalis*, represents a miniature scenario of a skeleton towering above human figurines as they move, caught involuntarily in an endless circular machine, whilst blacksmiths hammer at their anvil, invoking the alchemic world of metal, fire and torture.

There is a sense of removal, of absence, within their tiny movements and gestures, reflecting an awkward and at the same time seductive obsession with the reversible. The automaton defies mortal limitations by being, as Hans-Dieter Bahr reminds us, always 'present'. However, 'what it produces and presents us with [...] has never been truly absent. We wind up the mechanism and let it run to the point at which its repetitions start to bore us' (Bahr 1982, 127–133). A later example of a 'visual eavesdropper', concealed within the 'closet' of Baron van Kempelen's famous Turkish chess automaton of 1769, proved in fact to be a human dwarf who controlled the movement of chess pieces from below through a system of connecting wires.² However, in contrast to Kircher's talking bust, passively relaying others' verbal secrets, the human dwarf actively intervened, 'spying' into the supposed 'mind' of the chess player. Kircher's gallery of talking metal heads, that stood along the entrance wall of his *Collegium Romanum* and sprang into utterances as people passed by, deliberately represented the omnipresence of God as watcher and prompter. A predecessor of this idea was invented by Albertus Magnus (1193?–1280), who stemmed from the same religious order as Kircher. Magnus' moving, speaking automaton, constructed out of leather, wood and metal over a period of thirty years, functioned as a house servant, guarding the door and deciding which visitors were to be allowed in. It was supposedly given to Pope Sylvester II, but considered diabolical by Magnus' pupil Thomas Aquinas, and consequently destroyed after the former's death. Incidentally the same judgement was later applied to John Dee's spectacular mechanical theatre of the 1540s—a complex technological system of mirrors, wind and pulleys—that was formally denounced by a fearful public as demonic magic. However, the Jesuit theatre itself had a long tradition of using highly-developed technology in order to stage apparitions or disappearances, causing gods to fly or ghosts to materialize. Set within this familiar context, Kircher's concept of technology was entirely characteristic of a theatre of illusions, in which the operative force of his constructions was not obvious to the eye.

Occupying the final three echo chambers of this labyrinth are the eavesdropper, the performers as objects of the act, and the audience as witness to the event. I shall examine their roles according to Rokem's examples and my own, mapping their complicated inter-relationships within the context of a theatrical setting—as Classical / Early Modern play or early form of Sound Installation—that binds them together. The first protagonist is the eavesdropper him/herself: whether personified as a character onstage or a passer-by standing in front of the 'talking heads', an immediate difference of space between the two situations springs to mind. Crouched under a table or behind an arras, scarcely daring to breathe, he/she is confined to an almost claustrophobic vacuum-chamber, an 'in-between' space that is staged alongside the main action and serves to deliver its ambiguous scenario to a watching public. By contrast, an enormous distance separates the action from its listener in the labyrinthine structures of the *Panacousticon*, one that conceals the identity of the 'performers', since there is no visual pre-meditation on the eavesdropper's part.

However, it is conceivable that through a system of informants both their names and the nature of their political or social intrigue might speedily be conveyed to the all-suspecting acoustic spy.

In both Rokem's and my own examples, the audience becomes an eavesdropper: firstly, through the dramatic ploy of staging the scene in question and confiding in us as silent witnesses to the event, and secondly, by our double role of interacting directly with the means of eavesdropping, that is the 'talking head', in what would resemble nowadays a gigantic sound installation. Ultimately the eavesdropper's role is to gain information and thus power over the motives of others. Rokem emphasizes the dangerous double role played by characters such as Polonius, who move from potential victimizer to victim as they are exposed during their hidden deed (Rokem 2015, 112). The character of Phaedra in *Hippolytus* by Euripides (428 B.C.) also eavesdrops, but from a visible position onstage that is witnessed by the audience, whilst her unseen 'victims' reveal their verbal secrets from behind a closed door. Caught in the complex meta-discourse of the play, an eavesdropping audience is subject not only to the confessions of its individual protagonists but also to the mutual acts of observing and witnessing that occur between them in full knowledge of the others' secrets.

Turning to the babble of the performers, fully engaged in their intrigue, we note for the most part a major difference between their visual and aural presences when comparing early drama with Kircher's acoustic theatre. With few exceptions the two or more characters are fully visible to the audience during their dramatic moments of revelation, as illustrated by Rokem's examples from *Hamlet*, *Tartuffe*, or *Rosmersholm*. However, Shakespeare and Molière complicate the plot still further by making one of the protagonists (Gertrude or Elvira) fully aware of the eavesdropping situation of which she forms a part in the intrigue, thus heightening the level of dramatic tension for an audience as she attempts to prevent the discovery of the eavesdropper or plays provocatively on her seductive powers. Thus the scene has been pre-meditated by one or more characters. More intriguing still is the use of visual disguise by one of the performers in order to overhear the others' internal secrets, as in Shakespeare's *Much Ado* or Aristophanes' *The Poet and the Women* (411 B.C.). Doubly visible to an audience as both eavesdropper and illusory character, their deceptive presence is tinged with danger and excitement behind a façade of costume pieces, assumed gestures and altered voices.

By way of contrast, the 'performers' or members of the public caught in the web of the *Panacousticon* remain unseen by the eavesdropper. Only their voices, echoing through the resonant acoustic of a large hall or courtyard, filter up through the spirals of an amplifier—to be recognized or not by an authoritative listening power—along with the information that they contain. In a deliberately constructed surveillance system designed for the purpose, this invention confers all powers to the eavesdropper. In Kircher's museum space, however, the passing audience, eavesdropping by chance, are rendered powerless in the face of what they imagine to be omnipresent powers speaking through stone. No one would know where these (performers') voices come from, the situation thus bestowing ultimate power in the hands of the inventor himself.

On this note it remains to consider the role of the audience in all its complexity, caught within a barrage of plots, intrigues and secret knowledge whilst remaining essentially in a position of passivity. Rokem casts us as ‘eavesdroppers’ in the act of reading Socrates’ philosophical revelations on tragedy and comedy whilst the other characters sleep, in Plato’s *Symposium* (110). Phaedra includes us in her revelation to the chorus of what she has learnt through her secret deed in *Hippolytus* (428 B.C.) In later examples from Early Modern theatre, we are invited by the playwrights to both see and hear—as witnesses to the event—eavesdropping scenes in *Hamlet* and *Tartuffe*. Not being addressed directly within the context of the play, we are constantly found in a position of secretly absorbing its complex realities whilst identifying with each of the characters and the multiple tensions that ensue between them.



Figure 3: Entrance hall of the Museo Kircherianum from Romani Collegii Societatus Musaeum celeberrimum, *Girgio de Sepibus, Amsterdam: Jansson van Waesberghe (1678).*

The basis of Kircher’s audience remains an entirely different matter, however. Given the aural perspective of his acoustic theatres, one could argue that in the first instance only a small, elite ‘audience’ would be listening-in from a position of control, and in the second, that passers-by would be struck in awe by the formidable circumstances under which they witness an invisible voice. There is a different ‘play’ at work here, in which the direct role of the audience is crucial. A precursor to contemporary sound installations, the *Panacousticon* differs with regard to one important aspect: that of its relation to the public. Potential ulterior motives of power and intrigue, along with the desire to strike fear and wonder into a non-suspecting audience, gave his inventions a strong social, political and religious force within concurrent historical developments of the 1600s. An interesting parallel could be drawn between the omnipotent presence of his speaking stone statues and the *akousmata* of Pythagoras’ ‘veiled utterances’ from behind a curtain (Rokem 2015, 116). In both cases, the impact of a hidden voice generates a reverence on the part of the listener (Connor 2000, 40). The knowledge that an obscure meaning, deliberately hidden behind this philosopher’s thoughts, was to be reflected on by his students, would strike a chord with Kircher’s calculated *mise-en-scène* of religious reverence.

The dialogues

Having established the content of each echo chamber, I propose to bring their characters into a certain set of constellations that enables a dialogue to take place. Essentially the term 'echo' denotes an act of resounding from an original sound, in this case from what is spoken and heard. A spatial difference between these respective acoustic environments effects a change in aural perspective towards the original sound, which becomes, in turn, a secondary sound. Within our labyrinth of chambers, the imaginary position of each character's voice is determined by its reflected sound through a process of echo-location. From distance and proximity to height and depth, all dimensions of our pan-acoustic hearing capacities are intensified in this dark maze. Indeed, as reader-audience caught in a multitude of dialogues that fire back and forth we become a witness, an additional eavesdropper, to the various scenarios.

I begin with a dialogue between the object-beings, the eavesdropper and the performers:

CLOSET, CURTAIN, TABLE, DOOR, COSTUME: *[husky, dry, whispering voices]*

We remember, we contain the memory of all that has happened here; the fear, hatred, anxiety, excitement of you, Eavesdropper! You snatched your breath here, imbibing our closed space with your presence, leaving traces on our fabric; your sweat, heat and chill touched us, making us cling to your skin or shiver in empathy. The turmoil, trouble, conspiracy and seduction of your babbling words, Performers, invaded our space, soaked our fibres, entered our resonant bodies, vibrated in our still vacuum! Words spiked us, attacked and confounded the air around us. We were invaded by your hasty body, Eavesdropper, and by the discoverer snatching into us in a moment of angry turbulence. Hamlet's knife cutting, tearing through the material of our body as it reached you, Polonius!

EAVESDROPPER: *[slightly muffled voices]*

You hid me, gave me a screen of protection. You let those deadly secrets I wanted to hear seep through your neutral object-body, your solid reassuring presence. But I was stifled by the lack of air, your dusty fabric concealing my body. Stale, chilly, damp, dank, musty closet! I breathed in the moist, woody smell of a table, or a door behind which I was leaning. I saw the dirt and dust beside me on the floor under the table, feeling like an animal waiting for scraps of knowledge. Costumes, you took on the role of your appearance with my help and let me hide inside your skin. I hoped your fine layers of fabric would keep me from discovery... I was hot, sweating feverishly under this disguise, this mask of pretence.

PERFORMERS:

Eavesdropper, we can't hear you properly! Speak up! We were not aware of you or the object-beings concealing you. Except, perhaps, on some occasions, for one of us...

— And then oh, how I feared your discovery, Polonius!

— Oh, how I enjoyed provoking you, Orgon!

Both of us were split in two at that moment, hearing the 'echo' of our conversations as they sounded in your confined space; imagining the effect they would have.

— Me, I was amongst the other performers in *Much Ado*, playing a double role. I kept my wits about me in this nerve-racking situation, praying that no spontaneous gesture or word on my part would give me away whilst I enjoyed the spoils of gossip and intrigue relayed by my unsuspecting companions.

The focus shifts now to a different set of eavesdroppers and performers who are concerned with the 'talking bust':

TALKING BUST: *[resonant]*

My mouth is an echo chamber of thoughts. They bounce off the inner walls of my hollow metal cavity. You think perhaps that they are coming from a divine presence, as if I represented a messenger, a medium of God, lined up with my companions along the wall of this museum entrance.

On the other hand, my presence is ambiguous in that courtly setting. No one would suspect its double role. My 'mouth' and 'ears' are one long tunnel that bores through the cavities of this building in a spiral formation, and reaches the surface of a wall below. I have no control over what I 'hear' and 'tell' when you approach me, Eavesdropper. I involuntarily eavesdrop on you, Performers, in your courtyard, transmitting your voices through my empty vehicle to you, Eavesdropper.

You pass before me in the room upstairs, in the museum entrance, perhaps not knowing that I can 'speak'.... Listen! Come nearer!

EAVESDROPPER:

I'm interested in what you have to say, Talking Bust, conveying much-awaited and valuable secrets to me as I stand before you in anticipation. I know who you are, Performers! Rogues of conspiracy!

But walking through the museum entrance, on the other hand, I'm confounded as you spring into speech and dare not remain in front of you out of fear. You seem to watch me as I move along this corridor, waiting to judge my presence and sharing your thoughts with each successive statue, perhaps....

PERFORMERS: *[much echo, as in large spacious hall]*

We were caught in the act but not all of our conversations were ill-intended, Eavesdropper! We were powerless victims of you.

However, the museum gave us another role. There, we were anonymous voices and taken for omnipotent beings carrying messages from God. Only our inventor knew of us.

The Talking Bust continues, entering into a dialogue with uncanny forms of Automata and Beings of the supernatural world such as the Ghost, the Ancient Gods and the Angel:

TALKING BUST: *[resonant]*

I am a construction of our Jesuit inventor, made for a divine purpose in his Museum. My mechanism is complex and based on a profound knowledge of acoustics, mathematics and optical illusion.

AUTOMATON: *[mechanical, rasping, creaking, metallic voice]*

From his knowledge of natural magic my deeply religious master, Albertus Magnus, made me, a talking, moving automaton, and I remained faithful to my task. Your maker, Talking Bust, drew inspiration from the knowledge of my construction many years before.

— I was a predecessor to Magnus' invention, a mythological creature that could also speak, and was given this power by the use of alchemy. We were creations of the Early Greek imagination, realised in material form. We were sometimes built to scare our enemies by our enormous size and quasi-human likeness.

— As miniature figurines we defy death and show mortals the meaning of purgatory: an endless cycle of pain and torment which we, of course, do not feel, but which we oblige them to feel in our place. We defy time, always being caught in the vicious circle of the present. We were deliberately constructed by our clever inventors to strike fear into our feeble human audience.

GHOST: *[deep, resonant voice, plaintive, tired, full of despair]*

I am a restless spirit. Wrong has been done to me. I am plagued by memories of evil-doings that fell upon me, and find myself in the turmoil of purgatory. I was eavesdropping all along, listening to the twists and turns of lies and intrigue that ensued. I was forced to take on a visible form in order to speak to you, the Performers, in Gertrude's closet. My voice rises from the despair of my unjust murder.

— [WINDSWEPT ANGEL'S *voice*] I am aware of all that has gone before me in history, like you, Object-Beings, with your material memories, but am helpless to intervene, not possessing a mortal form.

— [GODS, *very resonant*] We, as the ancient 'gods', give signs to you Performers, you mere mortals caught in time and action. You, who believe in us and follow accordingly, fear any divine consequences of contradiction.

The supernatural eavesdroppers enter into dialogue with others in mortal form:

EAVESDROPPERS FROM THE SUPERNATURAL WORLD: *[resonant, authoritative]*

We listen in from the vantage point of beyond, exerting our powers through apparitions and signs to indicate our judgement on what we have heard from you, Performers! Thus we have an advantage over you, mortal Eavesdroppers.

EAVESDROPPER ONSTAGE: *[muffled voices]*

I agree. This situation is unbearably claustrophobic, frightening and thrilling at the same time. I have potential power over you, Performers, manipulating your silly intrigues to my advantage. But oh, if discovered in the act, I am demoralised, disgraced, set upon and killed! My power is no more!

HIDDEN SURVEYOR SPY: *[echo of large room, authoritative voice]*

Ha! My position is safe. I am alerted by my servants and accomplices from the court and thus informed as to the identity of these rogue Performers. But perhaps sometimes I'll just lend an ear idly to their otherwise anonymous, unwitting conversations out of pure amusement and indulge my unique powers.

EAVESDROPPING PUBLIC / AUDIENCE: *[whispered echo]*

We wander through Kircher's entrance passage to his Museum in awe, observed by these vacant but all-seeing metal heads, each resting on a podium, one after the other, in a row along the side of the corridor. They catch us with a word as we pass by, forcing us to stop in fear and surprise.

— We, the silent witnesses to events onstage, inwardly resound in response to the moods, discoveries, worries and amusing situations that befall you, Performers. Sometimes we can't help but let out a sigh, a cry, a laugh, a muffled giggle, or a sharp breath of anticipation which you no doubt hear. Our feeling, our thinking, communicates itself through our eyes, ears and sometimes our voices, all of which you must be aware across this empty but heavily-laden space that separates us. Our privilege as passive eavesdroppers is tempered by an almost unbearable empathy or loathing towards you as we identify with one character or another, each caught up in a web of deeds and consequences.

On this note we must let the Performers speak for themselves:

ONSTAGE PERFORMERS:

We are together at last, the two of us, confiding quietly and rapidly between us or disputing loudly the truth of what we know, or going through our private ritual as a group, expounding our secret knowledge and thoughts.

— *[quietly aside]* However, one of us is also in a double role, knowing full well that there is a hidden Eavesdropper in our midst. We play on our seductive powers in full knowledge of the effect that this will have on you, Eavesdropper! We worry that the situation will get out of hand as tempers flare—that you will reveal your presence by a noise, a shout!

ONSTAGE PERFORMER-EAVESDROPPERS:

Lucky for you! We have to play a double role as both and so are infinitely more vulnerable to exposure, only a veil of material hiding our real identity.

PERFORMERS AS PUBLIC:

Not aware of any such intrigue, except perhaps amongst ourselves, we talk incessantly in the noisy, vast hall of this building. Polite interjections rendered at full volume are deliberately interspersed, however, with lowered voices conveying important news, the latter thus being effectively disguised by a surrounding babble.

What the audience would have to say to these victims of eavesdropping remains the last word:

SURVEYOR SPY:

Ha! Your lowered tones still reach me! My ears are used to such confusion. I am a single, secretive audience doubling as an Eavesdropper. My motives are to manipulate and control events through the verbal information you pass on to me.

MUSEUM AUDIENCE: *[hushed voices]*

We are reverent to your utterances, O omnipotence, and listen attentively to your divine messages through these miraculous presences!

THEATRE AUDIENCE:

We remain passive in our reception of knowledge and information imparted to us. We read Plato and 'hear' his revelations of Socrates' thoughts in our mind's ear. We feel addressed as part of the chorus in Greek theatre. The playwrights have included us in their world, not addressing us by name, but making the play's reality come to life through our necessary presence as a 'sounding-board'.

At this point we, as supplementary audience caught in the cross-fire of labyrinthine dialogues, emerge with ringing ears from the dark space of the echo chambers.

On re-surfacing... a summary

It now remains for me to sum up the performative philosophies that have arisen from each constellation, comparing and contrasting them in turn. In doing so, I will pose parallel questions as to what emerges from this constructed aural event and how it is emphasised by being an instance of acoustic theatre. Sifting through the subject matter of these dialogues, certain recurrent themes begin to surface with regard to power, the (in)-animate, multiple realities, phenomenology, existentialism, memory, and society. Each is taken up in a different way by the characters belonging to a particular constellation, certain nuances echoing with more or less resonance according to their perspectival slant. In a deliberate process of shifting contexts, certain protagonists, such as the eavesdropper, the performer or the talking bust, have been placed anew in another constellation in order to reveal other aspects of their existence. Furthermore, a curious multiplicity results when members of the same functional group, such as audiences, performers or eavesdroppers, are brought together in one echo chamber. Facets of their roles are revealed with a more penetrating sharpness, exposing a hitherto hidden philosophical complexity in their utterances.

Beginning with the issue of power, brought to the fore repeatedly by the protagonists, we note the double role bestowed upon a performer who is secretly aware of a hidden eavesdropper onstage, thus remaining in an optimal position of manipulation with regard to the behaviour of both confessor and listener. Similarly, when confronted by the speech of talking metal statues, all sense of self-determination is removed from the innocent 'eavesdroppers' as they remain frozen in astonishment, thus conferring ultimate authority to the hidden creator-performer whom they assume to be God, but is in reality Kircher. This effect of acousmatisation assumes a power relation with the listener. Invisible sources of sound are deemed as having the capacity to see others who cannot see them. Divinity is thus associated with invisible sound whilst mortality contains a state of visible audition. Depending on the nature of an eavesdropper's existence, whether as spirit-being without the confines of a fixed time-space or as an active mortal being, there remains a very different capacity to exert any influence over events. Some supernatural beings are helpless, while others attempt to give signs or intervene as ghostly presences, thus intimidating the actors.

Power can quickly change hands if it stems from the grasp of mortals unable to fully determine the course of action. Indeed, our public performers in the courtyard are unwittingly subjected to the external control of intrigue whilst claiming to exercise this role themselves. They simultaneously assume and concede all knowledge. This double role within the confines of the court is confounded by the unknown presence of a triple eavesdropper solitarily listening from above. Like the supernatural characters in a play, an audience watching a piece of theatre finds itself outside of the time-space evoked by the plot and thus powerless to directly intervene. Both play a double role of witnessing one world whilst actually remaining in another. However, from the point of view of the playwright, an audience's presence is necessary as a powerful alibi within the re-creation of this 'other' reality, one that provides a plane of perspective towards events as they unfold. Its capacity to think in response to the action onstage gives it an essentially live, performative part, particularly when we consider the noisy, Elizabethan audiences of the 1600s.

A dialogue between the animate and the inanimate becomes very palpable in the echo chamber containing object-beings, eavesdroppers and performers. History leaves its trace in the very fibre and spaces that these objects inhabit, as a result of close interaction with human beings. Their presence is also infused into human awareness, affecting the eavesdroppers' responses and state of mind. In short, a double absorption takes place. Resembling the human form, the talking bust becomes all the more uncanny as an inanimate object seemingly capable of transmitting thought. An exertion of power over this curious being is reversed by a subtle ploy, rendering all control to its maker and none to its victims. Kircher assumes the role of an *acousmêtre*, a master-being behind the sound, a supposed voice without a body, an 'other', a 'gaze on our shoulders' (Verstraete 2009, 120). Indeed, these early precursors of robots beg an existential question as to their capabilities for moving, speaking and supposedly thinking: namely, what is thought? It evokes Descartes' theory of materialism in relation to bodies as a quantifiable substance and their fundamental difference to the unmeasured world of the spirit, which belongs to the realm of experience (Zielinski 2006, 33). Although a contemporary of Kircher, Descartes' divisional thinking was unknown to the former, whose work remained embedded in the natural philosophy of the sixteenth century, whereby 'symbols and the things themselves [...] are understood as the expression of nature' (Zielinski 2006, 120). Automata retain an ambiguous role between the mortal and the supernatural worlds in their reversible existence. They embody a material, rather than a spiritual, memory: 'a view of the musical automaton's inner workings revealed the viscera, lungs and mechanical fingers of pneumatic tubes, heaving bellows, cranking arms and mechanically articulated joints' (Satz 2010, 76).

Each constellation of characters seems to enhance the co-existence of several realities that are contained within their dialogue. Listening from within the confines of a neutral, dark labyrinth we note the richness of their complexity, like a finely-woven tapestry. Interlaced within the double role of eavesdropper and performer, a 'play' of awareness occurs in the one character as they maintain a foot in either world. This in turn relates to the theme of social structures of communication that operate simultaneously at multiple levels; confiding, betraying and concealing become part of the game amongst the courtiers of Kircher's *Panacousticon* or the characters of Greek and Early Modern theatre. The presence of parallel time-spaces within these realities serves to confound our perspective, obliging us as an audience to re-establish our own vantage point. The dichotomy between a fixed mortal existence and one that operates from outside of historical confines, such as the supernatural world, seizes our imagination. Furthermore, our clear division between the two is threatened by the confusing presence of automata. Spaces and places, including the objects that are found within them, assume another reality once we become aware of their fully-laden historical context.

This leads to another underlying theme present throughout each discourse: that of memory. Bergson compares the act of shifting from the present to the past, in order to delve into a particular moment, to the focussing of a camera (1911, 169–232). An analogy is clearly made with visual memory, the image returning to the mind's eye. However, in the case of eavesdropping, it seems relevant to compare the echoes of the mind's ear to the selective filter mechanism of a microphone in this contemporary comparison. Aural memory recalls certain important facts related by past conversations and rejects others that were not worthy of the ear's attention. By extension, the

material presence of object-beings would seem to conjure up memories located within the senses of smell and touch, whilst extra-sensory perceptions would be awakened by a re-encounter with automata or the spirit world. Indeed, on this note it is interesting to discover that images and signs were used as learning tools to trigger the memory a century before Kircher's time by Giulio Camillo in his *Memory Theatre* of 1554 (Yates 1966, 353). A human-size model of a constructed wooden theatre, its walls covered in gestural inscriptions, surrounded the subject standing on stage, and was designed to open up the memory depths of the mind by means of space and location. Thus a spatial architecture acted as an external structural reference for memory. By way of contrast, those amongst the constellation of characters endowed with an all-inclusive memory are supernatural beings such as the ghost, the gods and the angel. Theirs is a timeless memory of the spirit, going beyond the experiential boundaries of mortal beings.

Phenomenology plays a key role within the subject matter of each echo chamber. Things appear or are perceived, onstage or in the acoustic theatre, without our characters' knowing the cause. Objects assumed to be lifeless take on a threatening acoustic dimension, seemingly moving of their own accord. Ghosts, gods and automata fill the stage, their hidden, complex mechanical construction not even suspected by an all-believing 17th century audience. Both the human senses and the mind take note directly without the filter of reason, and thus render the experience as remarkable, as 'an event which grips my body' (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2003, 273). Within this labyrinth of voices, the phenomenon of sound takes on the qualities of an 'audio-phonetic skin' (Connor in Verstraete 2009, 47) that touches, and is touched by, the listener's body. We become aware of the effect of sound as a series of variations in air pressure in this dark space; we can imagine the added force of hearing familiar voices from behind a curtain without any visual distraction. At this point I have included my own perspective on *object-beings* with regard to the objects and sites described onstage or in the acoustic theatre. I add to the discussion a phenomenology not only of the subject, but also of the object, according to Thomas Nagel (1979). Deliberately including them as 'characters' in the conversation, I bestow a thinking role on each, one that allows for the experience of being as such, as a thing in itself. Thus many more aspects of an object's possible existence, not simply a functional one, come to the fore. Placed within this artificially constructed theatre of sound, namely my labyrinth of echo chambers, new contexts and meanings occur in the way that objects interact with the other performers. They are given weight, equal meaning, within the design of the 'play', offering a depth of presence that is non-subservient to a human one. This suspension of functional meaning is described by Umberto Eco as 'ostention' within the performative situation (Eco 1977, 107-117), whereby objects offer intentional signs within the perspective of possible worlds or situations.

Throughout this essay I have attempted to retain a performative element in my response to Rokem's own words, one that reflects an act of rebound that occurred in my own thinking whilst reading his text. In so doing my hope is to maintain and thus communicate an experience of immediacy, of the live, in this encounter between philosophy and performance. Focussing on the latter as an acoustic act, I have traced a path for thinking 'by way of echo', to return to my title. The oral event of speaking converges with the aural event of listening. Out of this emerges the act itself: that of philosophizing.

Notes

¹ <https://www.google.com/search?q=héron+d'alexandrie++images+of+cow+automata>

² For a contemporary re-enactment using a scale model, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZeBVedTtAo>.

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Biography

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