

COLLISION

Vol. 1, No. 3 (2012)
Art and the City

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



Ilic, Ljubica. "To Listen or Not to Listen?" *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 3 (2012): 82-89.

ABSTRACT

In 1965, Claude Chabrol created *La Muette* – a fifteen-minute homage to Paris's sixteenth district. In this short movie, Chabrol uses silence to ask some fundamental questions about the nature of human coexistence: the movie is seen, or better heard, from the perspective of a boy who, ignored by his parents, does not manage to say a word throughout; provoked by this imposed restriction, the boy decides to become not only "mute" but also "deaf." His decision, however, results in tragic consequences. In *La Muette*, Chabrol reminds us that the question of coexistence already posed by Virgil in his *Eclogues*, and signified by sound that freely resounds, has never ceased to be asked. In this *Collision*, I use the term "post-pastoral" to connect Virgil and Chabrol, and to open a discussion on sonically signified freedom.

KEYWORDS

Chabrol, silence, (co)existence, Virgil, post-pastoral

To Listen or Not to Listen?

Ljubica Ilic



• *La Murette* : Paris Heard by Claude Chabrol •

In Virgil's first eclogue, Meliboeus, exiled and dispossessed of his farm, complains:

You, Tityrus, under the spreading, sheltering beech,
Tune woodland musings on a delicate reed;
We flee our country's borders, our sweet fields,
Abandon home; you, lazing in the shade,
Make woods resound with lovely Amaryllis.

Tityrus responds with humble gratitude:

O Melibee, a god grants us this peace –
Ever a god to me, upon whose altar
A young lamb from our folds will often bleed.
He has allowed, you see, my herds to wander
And me to play as I will on a rustic pipe.¹

Virgil reminds us that the freedom to create and exist, or to “play as one will,” has always been difficult to attain and dependent on powers beyond one’s reach: the farmer Meliboeus shares the destiny of the thousands of victims of Roman civil wars exiled by emperor’s forces, while the freed slave Tityrus (who may be Virgil himself) has the option to stay in his homeland. For Virgil, Tityrus’s freedom is best conveyed by sound: his playing echoes through the woods, conquers space, and sonically describes a possibility of unconstrained existence. Simultaneously, it reinforces the sense of Meliboeus’s misfortune.

I reencountered Virgil’s idea about sonically signified freedom in a short movie by Claude Chabrol. In 1965, Chabrol, together with Jean Douchet, Jean Rouch, Jean–Daniel Pollet, Eric Rohmer, and Jean–Luc Goddard created a dedication to Paris and its various neighbourhoods and cityscapes in the omnibus *Paris vu par... (Six in Paris)*. Chabrol’s fifteen–minute homage to Paris’s sixteenth district, entitled *La Muette*, portrays the everyday life of a bourgeois family. Here as elsewhere, Chabrol’s obsessive vivisection of the life of Parisian bourgeoisie could be easily understood as a critique of urban life. But his directing choices, and, in the case of *La Muette*, his use of sound, tell a somewhat different story.

La Muette is seen – or better, heard – from the perspective of a boy who does not say a word throughout. It is as if he is mute, although in reality, the reason for his silence is entirely different. Chabrol sketches the boy’s daily routine. The boy returns home from school, the maid opens the door, the mother chatters on the phone, the father “entertains” the maid; in the background (as if heard from the apartment next door) – the *Andante* from Mozart’s “Facile” sonata is played badly; the father reminds the boy about the laws of algebra; the parents casually discuss themes like the death sentence over lunch, dinner and cheese course; their trivial disputes echo through the apartment. Bored, the boy leaves his room: he sticks two needles into what appears as the photo of an ancestor; he disposes of the mother’s medications; after these acts of rebellion, he finds the earplugs on the nightstand. He reads the instructions for use:

Form–fitting earplugs block vibrations and are perfectly sound–proof. Noise, the price we pay for modern civilization, is one of the main resources for [i.e. causes of] nervous disease. The sick and the nervous will now be able to sleep. Intellectuals will be able to work in silence thanks to these earplugs. Factory workers and all those with jobs who

are exposed to repetitive noise, which is damaging the auditory nerve, will protect their eardrums with earplugs.²

From this moment, everything changes: the boy decides to become not only “mute” but also “deaf.”

Now the movie seems to start all over again, only soundless. The sequence of images is almost the same: the boy comes back from school, encountering the maid, the mother, and the father; faces of his parents at the dining table now appear more grotesque because they are silent. The boy cannot hear the Mozart or the parents’ bickering. It is as if Chabrol, by juxtaposing these two perspectives – the state of voluntary *deafness* and involuntary exposure to sounds – equalizes muteness with verbal nonsense. The voluntary deafness, however, poses an ecological and ethical question: to listen or not to listen? How to listen, that is, coexist, and yet do so meaningfully? For Chabrol, there is no simple answer. Sonic pollution is difficult to deal with; but shutting oneself out from the world results in tragic consequences, as the end of the movie shows. The father demonstratively leaves the house. Enraged, the mother follows him and, falls down the stairs. The concluding sounds are her moans as she bleeds to death at the bottom of the staircase. In his voluntary isolation, the boy cannot hear a thing: he grabs his coat, takes the elevator, and sneaks out of the house without seeing his mother’s body. The final scene: a Parisian street, mute and deaf.

In exploring the power of silence, Chabrol uses sound to ask fundamental questions about the nature of human coexistence. For being voluntarily deaf only appears to be equivalent to being exposed to meaningless conversation: Chabrol’s tragic ending demonstrates that the answer is not silence, even though silence protects us from noise (“the price we pay for modern civilization”). This is a “lose-lose” situation: to listen, to participate, is challenging, but not listening leads to tragedy.

Chabrol reminds us that the question of free (co)existence posed as early as in Virgil’s *Eclogues*, and signified by sound that freely resounds has never ceased to be asked. But the comparison between Virgil’s resounding meadows and Chabrol’s soundscapes of Paris somehow seems out of place, reminding us of a long-lasting Western divide between nature and culture, and between pastoral and urban surroundings. Is there a way to overcome this division in order to discuss the two works side by

side, since they both deal with sonically signified freedom? Might the term “post-pastoral” be useful for this kind of approach?

• Soundscapes of the Post-Pastoral •

Since Virgil, the Western concept of “the pastoral” comprises representations of idealized modes of existence in which the self and the surroundings harmonize in permanent consonance. The pastoral mode has been traditionally used to depict the supposed rifts between nature and artifice, and between actual and ideal living spaces.³ Given contemporary environmental crises, these rifts between how we actually live (and often cause destruction) and how we imagine existence become ever more relevant, bringing up new questions about the relationship between contemporary subjectivity and the concept of space in its growing complexity.

In explaining new European approaches to ecocritical theory, Kate Rigby and Axel Goodbody claim that, “given the shaping impact of relatively dense populations on the land over the centuries,” European ecocritics are more likely to depart from traditional dichotomy of nature and culture in order to deal with cultural landscapes and the pastoral rather than wilderness.⁴ And this is the case with Terry Gifford’s approach to the pastoral in literature. Gifford moves away from dialectics of the pastoral and anti-pastoral, and introduces the term “post-pastoral.”⁵ He discusses six characteristics of the post-pastoral. Two of them are crucial to my understanding of the term. First, nature is not merely a pleasant idyll. Second, and more important: culture is nature, not its opposition.⁶ According to Gifford, the post-pastoral is not equivalent to postmodern because its meaning is more conceptual than temporal, applicable to historically diverse literatures. It is “post” because it overcomes the traps of the pastoral.⁷ Gifford claims:

“Post-pastoral” literature is that which escapes the closed circuit of the idealized pastoral and its anti-pastoral corrective. It seeks to heal the separations of culture and nature by asking, “What would be the features of writing that can point towards a right way to live at home on our planet earth?”⁸

I would like to extend Gifford's definition even further. If the post-pastoral mode negates the division between nature and culture, can we use this term to describe an ecologically-aware relationship with space in general? Is it time for a new totality based on the simple fact that we share the environment in which we live? Or is it useful, after all, to leave the issue of modernity aside?⁹ All those questions reflect a need for a paradigm shift in discussions of our surroundings, as prefixes like *post*, *hyper* (as in *hyperspace*, *hyper-real*), or *off* (as in *off-modern*) suggest. Gifford's post-pastoral conveniently signifies the relationship with our environment which occurs when the rift between culture and nature becomes obsolete while the ideology of this rift still governs our collective imagination. For, all metaphors for our relationship with space, place and environment (natural vs. cultural, wild vs. peopled, rural vs. urban) still function within the frame that confirms the nature-culture divide. And the idealization of what supposedly opposes our cultured existence – including nature, wilderness, premodern and non-Western holistic epistemes – only strengthens what we are trying to overcome: the alienation of our surroundings. In reality, nature and culture are intertwined in a manner that makes it impossible to delineate where one ends and another begins. This claim does not negate our responsibility for our environmental problems. It only attests to the complexity of our surroundings. Our environment is a hybrid comprised of the wild, premodern, and holistic, as well as the industrial, technological, and mechanized, all of which are globally interconnected. This interconnectedness warns us that there are no places to escape to or places to escape from.

The term "post-pastoral" enables us to make transhistorical connections while avoiding the traps of dialectics. By focusing on the phenomenological aspects of listening and the metaphorical power of sound to stand for freedom and (co)existence, the sonic post-pastoral allows us to hear and explore urbanity as one of the many modes of our *nature-culture*.¹⁰ As Chabrol's eavesdropping on Paris reminds us: the answer is to listen, even if it is only to hear a dissonance.

• Notes •

¹ Translation by Paul J. Alpers in *What is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 23.

² The translation is from: Claude Chabrol, “La Muette,” in *Six in Paris*. VHS. Directed by Claude Chabrol, Jean Douchet, Jean-Luc Goddard, Jean-Daniel Pollet, Eric Rohmer, and Jean Rouch (New York: New Yorker Video, 1998).

³ Its longevity in Western culture, however, reveals more than a persistent fascination with utopian ideals: Giuseppe Gerbino, for example, in *Music and the Myth of Arcadia in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) explains the Renaissance pastoral as a subversive genre – a narrative strategy that uses imaginary universe of Arcadia to explain the real universe of the Renaissance court; Paul Alpers discovers its ethical origins and claims that *loci amoeni* and echoing woods “have as much to do with establishing a space for song as with man’s relation to nature” (Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 32).

⁴ Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, “Introduction,” in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, eds. Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 3.

⁵ The anti-pastoral “corrects” the pastoral by realistically representing the downsides of life in nature. It indirectly points at the advantages of human ability to conquer nature.

⁶ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁷ Terry Gifford, “Judith Wright’s Poetry and the Turn to the Post-Pastoral,” *Australian Humanities Review*, 48 (2010): 75.

⁸ Terry Gifford, “Post-Pastoral as a Tool of Ecocriticism,” in *Pastoral and the Humanities: Arcadia Re-inscribed*, eds. Mathilde Skoie and Sonia Bjørnstad-Velásquez (Bristol, Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2006), 17.

⁹ Is Bruno Latour right when he claims that we have practically never been modern? Is it time to accept Baudrillard’s proclamation of those kinds of labels as elitist? See: Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), and Jean Baudrillard, “The Violence of the Global,” <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385>, (accessed June 28, 2012).

¹⁰ Bruno Latour’s notion of *nature-culture* reminds us that the ideology of modernity born out of the “purification” of the human from non-human still dominates our modes of thinking, while in practice we are constantly faced with the hybridization of the two spheres. The “post-pastoral” conveys the same contradiction.

• Bibliography •

Alpers, Paul J. *What is Pastoral?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Baudrillard, Jean. "The Violence of the Global."
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385>.

Chabrol, Claude. "La Muette." In *Six in Paris*. VHS. Directed by Claude Chabrol, Jean Douchet, Jean-Luc Goddard, Jean-Daniel Pollet, Eric Rohmer, and Jean Rouch. New York: New Yorker Video, 1998.

Gerbino, Giuseppe. *Music and the Myth of Arcadia in Renaissance Italy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Gifford, Terry. *Pastoral*. London: Routledge, 1999.

———. "Judith Wright's Poetry and the Turn to the Post-Pastoral." *Australian Humanities Review*, issue 48 (2010): 75–86.

———. "Post-Pastoral as a Tool of Ecocriticism." In *Pastoral and the Humanities: Arcadia Re-inscribed*, edited by Mathilde Skoie, Sonia Bjørnstad-Velásquez. 14–24. Bristol, Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2006.

Goodbody, Axel and Kate Rigby. "Introduction." In *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, edited by Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, 2–17. Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2011.

Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.