



On Listening

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"On Listening" is a video essay on what listening entails and what it makes possible. Focusing on the physical, tangible aspects of listening as well as its more imaginative dimensions, it makes a case for listening as an embodied orientation that forges relationships across time and space.





Creator's Statement

A solitary man sips his nightcap. A tape deck plays an old film song. The man hums and sings along, a little out of tune, out of sync at times. When I first watched this sequence from *Aligarh*, Hansal Mehta's 2015 biopic on Ramchandra Siras, I was charmed. In the figure of Siras (Manoj Bajpayee), I saw myself and countless other fans. Whether or not one is partial to Hindi film music or pours a peg of whiskey while sinking into a beloved tune, the sensory pleasures of this scene are familiar. The "structure of feeling" that animates Siras' quotidian desires is palpable (Williams 1977). There is, moreover, something intimate—and intimately South Asian—about how Siras moves to the music. The flick of his wrist, the way he shakes his head in admiration, his quiet yet noisy sighs. These gestures embody a mode of listening that I, too, enact in certain contexts. In watching and rewatching the whiskey-and-music scene, though, I realized that it is not simply the thrill and comfort of identification that have me hooked. I tarry in such scenes of cinematic listening for I find them good to think with. As I crafted this (my first) video essay, they became sites to "materially think through [my sense and] knowledge" of what listening entails and what it makes possible (Grant 2014: 58).

"On Listening" is one of several recursive attempts on my part to reframe listening. It takes its cue from a concept and methodology that Nina Sun Eidsheim develops in *The Race of Sound*. Eidsheim uses the phrase "listening to listening" to direct attention away from essentialist notions of voice (as innate, natural, and unmediated). Voice, she argues, is "always already produced through social relationships, within which it is heard and reproduced" (2019: 27). By "listening to listening," we can uncover the auditory habits and discourses that reify voice. The recognition that listening is political—that it has the capacity not only to objectify sounds, but also to unsettle well-worn habits of the ear—runs through the broader corpus of feminist scholarship

on sound and music. Reading Jennifer Stoeber (2016), Lisbeth Lipari (2014), and Roshanak Kheshti (2015) (to name but a few colleagues on whose work I build), I came to understand listening as a critical and ethical endeavor. Listening may be a sensory practice into which we are socialized and that we often repeat thoughtlessly, but it needn't remain just that. In my book *Listening with a Feminist Ear* (Sundar 2023), I adopt an aural sensibility attuned to how power and privilege are materialized in sound (in Bombay cinema) which simultaneously engenders counter-hegemonic imaginaries. Framing listening as a site of both peril and promise, I reinvigorate debates about the gendering of voice and body in cinema and the role of sound and media in conjuring community. I model an even more reflexive approach in my contribution to *Thinking with an Accent*. There, I propose “listening with an accent” as a mode of audition keenly aware of its location: rather than listening for the sound of place in others’ voices (which is how accent is typically understood), I pay attention to the place from which I listen. Inspired by Trinh T. Minh-ha’s sage advice to “not speak about but rather to speak nearby,” I offer a way of listening that is situated and self-conscious, that seeks not to decipher the unfamiliar so much as to be “disoriented” by it (Trinh, qtd. in Chen 1992: 87; Ahmed 2006).

In this video essay, I cover similar conceptual terrain as my aforementioned work, but pause longer over the textures and temporalities of listening. In a nod to Eidsheim’s core question—“Why do I hear the person in this way?”—my framing text centers the experience of the listener (“I”). This is not to say that listening is a radically individual or subjective experience. On the contrary, I argue that even solitary listening is a relational endeavor, a means of orienting ourselves vis-à-vis the social, material, and symbolic worlds we inhabit.

The video essay first tunes in to the materiality of listening. Having written previously of the relationship of sight and sound, and mindful also of Deaf and disability studies critiques of sound studies’ “aural fixation,” I knew that listening to listening would have to involve more than the ear (Mayberry Scott 2017). Working on this video essay confirmed my sense that what my fellow editors and I claim of accent is as true of listening: it “is produced as much in the movement of tongues, mouths, and hands as in the embodied acts of reading, watching, [and] performing” (Rangan et al. 2023: 11). The ten-second shot of Siras’ feet acts as a bridge between the first half of the video essay, which emphasizes the physical and tangible aspects of listening, and the second, which draws out the more imaginative associations listening makes possible. My choice to use gerunds (verbs that function as nouns) keeps in play the idea that listening is not passive. Listening does things—and we do things when we listen. In listening, we may create sound. We may conjure that which we purport to hear. The annotations also help link the aural and the oral to other sensory domains. Thus, for

instance, in noting that I “hear” touching, I am suggesting that listening is itself a kind of touching (Campt 2017: 6). The “gesturing” I identify is a mimetic movement both literal and figurative.

Placing the whiskey-and-music scene in a contrapuntal relationship with a few other filmic fragments unfolds pasts and futures, hopes and desires, beyond those that are apparent on screen. In one such clip, Deepu (Rajkummar Rao) reads silently on a bus ride, and we hear the poem aloud in Siras’ (Bajpayee’s) voice. That is, we hear Siras’ “writing voice” reciting the English translation he penned as a gift to his young friend, who cannot read the Marathi version (Chow 2016). Another features the actress Mala Sinha lip-synching to playback singer Lata Mangeshkar’s voice. This is the same song that Siras listens to on his tape deck, but as picturized in *Anpadh* (1962). A third fragment depicts Siras’ memory of a night with his lover Irfan. Through these aural, visual, and textual juxtapositions, I set in motion a series of temporal and spatial connections and disjunctures. I multiply both the figure of the listener and the sounds that hold her attention to underscore the dynamic relationship between subjects and objects and the ways in which we inhabit others’ voices (or not) when we listen (Baron 2021).

In crafting this video essay, I sought to retain the stark simplicity of my source text, the room it allows to think and feel and wander. I also wanted to make the politics of my intervention clear (Harewood 2020). As I mulled over whether I had succeeded, Nabeel Zuberi’s “Listening while Muslim” came to mind. Music, he argues, “enacts and enables affective attunements that can become radical counter-moods and foster political agency” (2017: 35). This, I have come to understand, is true of listening more generally. And this, in some small measure, is what I hope I have achieved in “On Listening.”

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Biography

Pavitra Sundar is Associate Professor of Literature at Hamilton College, where she teaches courses on film, literature, and sound, with a focus on South Asia. Her work on the gendered politics of voice and media have appeared in *BioScope*, *Communication, Culture, and Critique*, *Jump Cut*, and the *Sounding Out!* blog, among other venues. She has coedited special issues on masculinities (with Praseeda Gopinath, *South Asian Popular Culture*, 2020) and decolonial feminisms (with Debashree Mukherjee, *Feminist Media Histories*, 2022). Her most recent, open-access publications include *Listening with a Feminist Ear* (University of Michigan Press, 2023), which was long-listed for the Kraszna-Krausz award and won honorable mention for the Modern Language Association's Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for South Asian Studies, and *Thinking with an Accent* (University of California Press, 2023, coedited with Pooja Rangan, Akshya Saxena, and Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan), which won the American Comparative Literature Association's René Wellek Prize for best edited essay collection.

Review by Anupama Prabhala, Loyola Marymount University

Aural pleasure has been a founding principle for heightening expression in talking Hindi Cinema. Sundar's work is easily one of the most powerful video essays I have watched—and heard—on how sound can transmute affect in Hindi cinema, be it through song or language—how sound and image can be stitched together to enhance both poetic effect and affect. As Sundar eloquently puts it, allowing ourselves to listen to how we listen allows us to experience the political possibilities of sonic expression.

Sundar deploys a delicate approach—never intervening, only guiding the flow of images to let them speak, so that we can listen. This allows her videographic and conceptual skill to shine, such that it allows musicality and speech to guide our relationship to the image, both within the diegesis of the film in question, *Aligarh* (2015), and its relationship to the extraordinarily lilting *Aapki Nazron Mein Samjha/Your Eyes Understand* (*Anpadh/Illiterate*, 1962).

I had seen *Aligarh* before, yet Sundar immediately brought a new understanding of aspects of sound and image that I had not *listened* to before: Siras' (Manoj Bajpayee) feet tapping gently to Lata Mangeshkar's exquisitely painful song, Mala Sinha's desiring female gaze to foreground the deafening absence of any sound that can articulate Siras' longing for his past lover or for Deepu (Raj Kumar Rao).

I was particularly moved by Sundar's use of aural duration to show how music can do the work of forging transcendental relationships that defy time, space and geography. She allows the song to unfold the images they give meaning to, using only the briefest, yet the most eloquent text. Most significantly, she articulates through the video essay how music allows the ear to listen to the film scenarist, and the video-essay scholar as scenarist, to be heard above the noise of cultural prohibitions and censure that affect same-sex relationships in India.

Further, Sundar's video essay reframes listening as a *song practice* that is particularly useful to show how it may defy, or even transmute, the punishing silence that stymies the minutiae of all felt experience in contemporary India. The emphasis is not on the singer or the musical number, as in traditional academic scholarship. Sundar makes full use of videographic criticism to shift the focus to listening as a nuanced and multipronged material practice.

What could be a better scholarly object than a Hindi film song for scholarship that puts sound to work to rethink the predominance of the image? And what if both sound and image are transmuted by the subjectivity and body, including the foot tapping, finger-flicking gestures of the listener? Sundar uses these tools to illustrate the agency and embodiment of the listener as itself a form of resultant poesis, drawing attention to the glow of Siras' built environment, the particularities of his memory; the timber of his voice and intonation, not excluding the musical number as a separate entity that allows

itself to be untethered from its place of production through the act of listening. Sundar shows us how to embrace the musicality of the silent, the accented and the unheard.

Review by Srija Sanyal, Ronin Institute for Independent Scholarship

In “On Listening,” the author embarks on a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted dimensions inherent within the act of listening, weaving together theoretical insights, cinematic analysis, and personal reflections to illuminate the intricate tapestry of auditory perception. Through a meticulous dissection of selected filmic sequences, particularly drawn from Hansal Mehta’s *Aligarh* (2015), the author deftly unpacks the corporeal, temporal, and imaginative realms that underpin the act of listening.

Central to the author’s work is the concept of “listening to listening,” a framework derived from Nina Sun Eidsheim’s seminal work, which dismantles essentialist notions of voice and foregrounds the socio-political dynamics embedded within auditory experiences. By foregrounding the relational nature of listening, the author adeptly navigates through a labyrinth of theoretical perspectives, incorporating insights from feminist scholarship on sound and media to underscore listening as a site of both potentiality and peril. The video essay navigates through a rich array of sensory modalities, transcending the auditory domain to encompass the tactile, visual, and textual dimensions of listening. Through judicious selection of filmic fragments, the author orchestrates a symphony of temporal and spatial connections, inviting viewers to traverse the liminal spaces between past and present, self and other. The inclusion of annotations further enriches the viewing experience, prompting audiences to critically engage with the embodied acts of listening and the nuanced interplay between perception and production. Of particular significance is the author’s interrogation of the politics inherent within listening practices. Drawing upon Nabeel Zuberi’s conceptualization of music as a catalyst for affective attunements and political agency, the author elucidates how listening serves as a potent site for the negotiation of power dynamics and the cultivation of counter-narratives. Through juxtapositions of cinematic fragments and incisive textual analysis, the author unveils the subversive potentialities latent within the act of listening, foregrounding its capacity to destabilize hegemonic discourses and engender transformative modes of engagement.

In conclusion, “On Listening” emerges as a tour de force in sonic scholarship, offering a compelling synthesis of theoretical rigor, cinematic acumen, and personal introspection. By foregrounding the embodied dimensions of auditory perception and excavating the socio-political resonances embedded within listening practices, the author invites audiences to reimagine the contours of sonic engagement and chart new trajectories towards sonic emancipation.

