

Shelley Trower - Senses of Vibration

Many commentators describe the experience of the bass in dance music as an 'extra-auditory' experience - not just heard by our ears but through our whole body.

Sound, at its lowest and loudest, begins to break down into separate, palpable vibrations. Bass notes in the ground, underfoot, in our bones. Slow the sound down further and each vibration might be separated out, counted, added up; there is no more sound, just individual shocks, one at a time.

The vibratory quality of sound can be experienced as palpable and audible and also visible. We can feel, hear and see a subwoofer vibrate, and see its effects on other bodies or matter: on the glass that bounces its way gradually across the top of a speaker and smashes on the floor, on the cat that attempts to pretend nothing is happening⁴, and on potato starch.⁵ The cultural prominence of vibrating speakers seems evident in the multiple ways in which they continue to be adapted for musical, commercial and artistic purposes or other forms of entertainment.

Vibration provides the connection between the science of energies and bodies in movement - physics - and a whole range of sciences (or would-be sciences) of minds in action - neurology, psychology, spiritualism. In 'White Lives on Speaker', it turns out, Kato and Ito are reviving, repeating even, an older fascination with the capacity of the material world to vibrate the mind and that of the mind to vibrate the world.

So although sound in a sense is central to the vibratory paradigm it is also key to understanding the role of sensory experience in general and how it was rooted in the human body and technologies.²² Sound was used as a model for the movement inside our own nervous systems as well as for universal energies and technological vibrations. Vibratory technologies also provided models for the nervous body, a body conceived of in turn as especially sensitive to those technological vibrations. Auditory technologies in particular, including musical strings and telephone wires as transmitters of sonic and electrical vibrations, were used as an image for the vibrating nerves that were so crucial to the idea of the sensitive body which developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a body that is especially sensitive and responsive to the vibrations of the external world – from light and other forms of ethereal energy to the more palpable, painful and pleasurable vibrations of technology and industry, including the ‘shocks’ produced by railway trains and the therapeutic motions of the percuter. All such technologies – exploring, exploiting, directing, and harnessing the potential of vibration, and seeking to manage its movement between pleasure and pain – may be seen, therefore, as antecedents of the subwoofer. Although it is primarily a history of vibration between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, this book might also be read as a sort of prehistory of the vibrating floor of the 1990s nightclub.

Vibration commonly provides a means of conceptualizing resistance to boundaries and identities in contemporary theory, which we might begin to trace back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. ‘Vibrations are *becomings* that undermine stable forms and identities’, notes David Bissell, following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.³⁵ For Jean Luc Nancy, ‘The sonorous [...] outweighs form. It does not dissolve it but rather enlarges it; it gives it an amplitude, a density and a vibration or an undulation whose outline never does anything but approach’.³⁶ For Latour, vibration provides a model for ‘entities with uncertain boundaries, entities that hesitate, quake, and induce perplexity’.³⁷ Vibration, not itself a thing or matter, can move simultaneously through subjects as well as objects, bridging internal and

external worlds. Indeed, vibration was key to the increasing understanding that mind itself is material, as Enlightenment thinkers had begun to shift attention from the transcendent soul to the mechanics of physical form.³⁸ In particular, eighteenth-century associationism began to theorize that the external world vibrates the nerves; vibrations in the nerves transmit sensations to the brain; vibration-sensations generate ideas, feelings, memories, thought, imagination.

Vibration plays a part in the history of the ‘material imagination’, a concept which also collapses or indeed makes meaningless the distinction between subject and object.

... Life depends on having enough excitability at one’s disposal within his or her organism and on the availability of exciting powers in the external world, necessary as stimulation.

The ‘universal power’ is sonorous, indicating that its ‘different forms’ are on a periodic continuum. The nerves ‘translate’ these forms into ‘facts of consciousness and thought’; each nerve ‘replies’ and ‘resounds’.