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## Hearing Things: Telephones and Auditory Theory

### Ventriloquism

Sometimes, the ear seems to follow the eye. Ventriloquism depends on visual governance. Sounds are attributed to eye-catching things. Psychologists and pedagogues have testified that they themselves would rather be blind than deaf, and yet the ear often appears to be a dummy that can neither speak nor move of its own accord. Hearing is also believing. Didn't the ear make the mind vulnerable to Pavlov's bell ringing? And so many heard phonemes and fundamentals are auditory illusions that simply pass unremarked.

Another ear has been described in the last two centuries, one that amplifies and learns and even makes its own sounds. This ear is a blood relative of the telephone—not in the least because a severed organ was the transmitting component in an early version of the machine.<sup>1</sup> The telephone and the ear were measured against one another in the twentieth century, the former becoming a psychoacoustic instrument as well as an appliance for communication. A new definition of normal hearing was the result, one that admittedly extended certain theories produced by previous architectural and musical models. The ear was no longer a telephone, but suddenly any two systems could be brought into conversation with one another. Everything could speak, which is to say everything could be made to speak a universal language.

Jonathan Crary's account of the modern science of seeing, which one might imagine being transplanted to the history of psycho-acoustics, warns that "our physiological apparatus is again and again shown to be defective, inconsistent, prey to illusion, and, in a crucial manner, susceptible to external procedures of manipulation and stimulation that have the essential capacity *to produce experience for the subject*".<sup>2</sup> As a statistical subject, the modern hearer was inherently variant;

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1 See Robert V. Bruce, *Bell: Alexander Graham Bell and the Conquest of Solitude* (Boston, 1973), p. 121. More recent re-tellings of this anecdote can be found in: Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln, 1989) and Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, 2003).