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On the edge: materialities of headphone listening

In 'The intertwining—the chiasm' (1968 [1964]), Maurice Merleau-Ponty poses the question: 'Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?' The answer, he suggests, emerges in part from a close consideration of the asymptotic dyad of touching/touched, elucidating the complex relationship between the body as lived and the body as object. While Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly consider technologies during the essay, recent postphenomenological work by Aud Sissel Hoel and Annamaria Carusi (2018) interprets Merleau-Ponty's body schema as highlighting 'the co-functioning of embodiment and technicity' insofar as the body 'has the capacity to alter its own borders, by acquiring new habits and by incorporating symbolisms and tools'. Taking Merleau-Ponty's privileging of touch as my theoretical entry point, and drawing on Edward Casey's (2017) recent 'peri-phenomenological' investigation of the edges of the lived body, I consider the ubiquitous practice of headphone listening through a material lens, highlighting the ways in which the tactile connection between so-called 'hearable' technologies and the body gestures towards the complex role of technological mediation in individuals' experiences of bodily integrity and liminality. Through analysis of primary ethnographic data, I examine headphone listening at the interface between body and technology, engaging with individuals' awareness of the material contiguity of self and technology and its impact on their experiences of embodied space. Headphone listening is framed as an intimate sensory coagulation of the sonic and the tactile, emerging as the flesh of the body meets that of the machine.