

COUNTERING 'CANCEL CULTURE' WITH A NEW ETHICS OF LISTENING

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Project Description

'Cancel Culture' is the latest phenomenon disrupting contemporary public debates.¹ Emerging from rightful resistances by activist movements such as Black Lives Matter and #Me Too, it collapsed in extreme forms of censorship, in which groups both on the (far) left and the (far) right started barricading people's access to the public debate by ostracizing 'the other' as interlocutor. Its intense intolerance makes 'Cancel Culture' a toxic threat to every open society. Not only does 'Cancel Culture' demonstrate that freedom of speech *for all members of society* is not a given, it also shows that one of the essential skills of any conversation, *listening*, grows more and more absent in the current public sphere.

This research project therefore proposes to explore *the art of listening*. Its **central research question** is '*What is listening and how can listening be made effective in the context of "cancel culture"?*' We investigate the nature and practices of listening, attention, and silence with the **goal** of developing *a new ethics of listening* apt for the public debate. The **societal aim** of this project is *to counter Cancel Culture* and in so doing *help public debates make amends towards more constructive dialogues* in a public sphere dominated by social media and 'post-truth'. Its **scholarly aim** is *to develop an ethics of listening*, a philosophy which, surprisingly, does not exist as yet.²

Two of its sub-research questions are:

1. How does 'cancel culture' obstruct public debates, specifically the act of listening?
2. What does it mean to listen to another person and what can we learn from philosophical studies and artistic practices on listening, attention and silence about the art of listening?

Jenny Odell's *How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Carlton: Black Inc., 2019) will serve as **theoretical frame**, supplemented by philosophical texts and artistic performances thematizing:

1. *Listening* - e.g., Erich Fromm, *The Art of Listening* (1964), Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (1923);
2. *Attention* - e.g., Wayne Wu, *Attention* (2014); Simone Weil on attention in *Notebooks* (1984);
3. *Silence* - e.g., Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* (MoMa 2010) along with 'The Artist is Kinda Present' by An Xiao (MoMa 2010); John Cage's *4'33"* (1952).

The **data** are philosophical concepts and theories plus online and on-site artistic performances. The **methods** consist in conceptual analysis, philosophical analysis, content analysis, rhetorical analysis, and visual analysis. The planned **output** is the workshop *The Art of Listening* and the co-authored journal article 'Countering "Cancel Culture" with a New Ethics of Listening'. This project is a **pilot project** for a larger, international research project on the *Ethics and Aesthetics of Conversation, Listening, and Silence* Prange & Heynders are currently setting up and for which they plan to apply for an NWO-OC or ERC-Grant in 2022.

¹It emerged in the United States when, in the Summer of 2020, 153 public intellectuals sent a 'Letter on Justice and Open Debate' to Harper's Magazine to voice their concern about a new extreme form of censorship entering the public sphere, soon after baptized 'cancel culture' (<https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>).

²The only existing book on the 'philosophy of listening' is *De filosofie van het luisteren: Partituren van het Zijn* by Hub Zwart (Nijmegen: Van Tilt, 2012). Offering a scientific approach to understand the cosmos through music, the book does not provide an analysis of the act of listening nor a focus on the public debate.

Key words:

'Cancel Culture'; (the philosophy and art of) listening; public sphere; social media.

Project timeline:

Planned output:

1. Co-authored article publication Prange, Heynders and RT;
2. Co-organized workshop *The Art of Listening* Prange, Heynders and RT.

Time investment: 4 months x 6 hours per week.

Component 1: Analysis of 'Cancel Culture' and study of philosophical theories and concepts of listening, attention, and silence – September 2021

Component 2: Collecting data on and analysis of artistic and literary practices and performances – October 2021

Component 3: Organizing and hosting the workshop 'The Art of Listening' – November 2021

Component 4: Writing academic article 'Countering "Cancel Culture" with a New Ethics of Listening' – December 2021

Research Trainee Profile:

The RT studies Art & Media/ Cultural Studies and/ or Philosophy (Philosophy of art/ aesthetics/phenomenology) on BA 3/ MA level. Students from UCT with a clear interest in the art/ ethics/ aesthetics of listening or related topics are also invited to apply.

How to apply:

Please send a resume and brief motivation letter to:

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