

# We Live Inside The Shepard Tone

*Sarah Lyons*

5–6 minutes



Someone needs to catch me up to speed with the new definition of "consequences" because I think the meaning of that word has changed.

Remember Jeffery Epstein? Remember how new revelations about the extent of his relationship with Donald Trump was causing his base to get "riled up" or "loose faith"? Remember how this was the first thing that was going to have *consequences* for him? What happened to that?

[I wrote back in January](#) about how Luigi and the UFOs people were seeing over the skies of New Jersey felt linked because of

their forever-immanence. Both were events that seemed like they should be far more consequential than they ended up being. That sense of perma-dread has only increased recently with Trump sending the National Guard into DC to patrol the streets, and threatening the same action in other American cities. This is it, right? Except it's not. Why does every day feel like the apocalypse and a Tuesday simultaneously?



(Image: *Punch Drunk Love* Dir. Paul Thomas Anderson)

I'd say that since around 2016 we have been living in a state of constant escalation without a destination or cliff. Every day, everything stays the same but it also somehow gets worse. Every month there is an event, or series of events, that promises rupture. Every single moment feels like the air is about to snap in half, and is as boring and stifling as a hot summer day with no wind. It's all too much, and nothing seems to happen at all.

In the mid-twentieth century a scientist named Roger Shepard created something strange: a sound no one had heard before. The tone, named The Shepard Tone, consists of two notes being played an octave apart "But when you use this sonic formation in a chromatic scale, either moving up or down, a

curious thing happens: you'll hear pitches that either ascend or descend, but never arrive at any resolution." (X)

This creates an auditory illusion, a sonic spiral that ascends and builds, giving one the feeling that the pitch is going to reach an end point, but it never does. It never crescendos, never stops.

[You can listen to it here.](#)



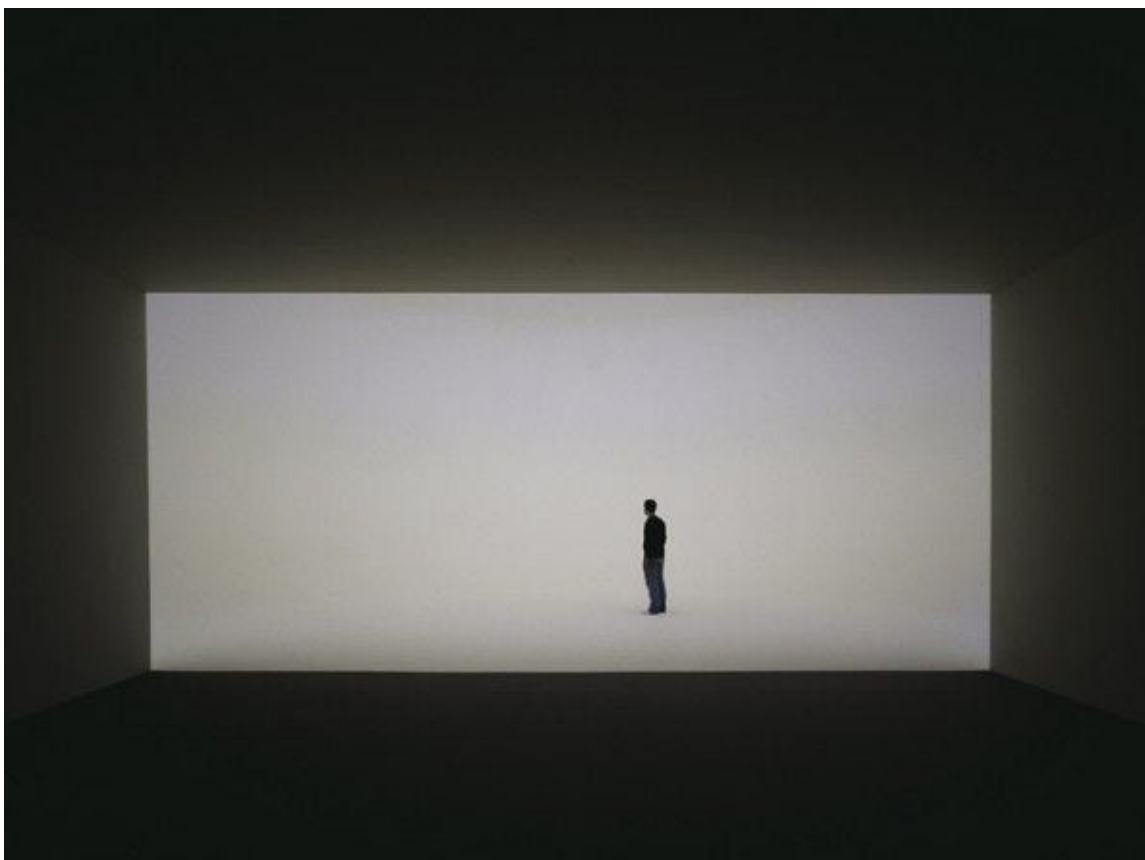
Image credit: (X)

The other thing about this noise is that it is terrifying. The constant spiral upwards or downwards creates a sense of dread that reaches deep down inside you. DJs, composers, and directors like Christopher Nolan have used this sound to great effect in art to create a sense of anticipation and anxiety. People claim that listening to it too long is the equivalent of auditory torture.

Reality began with a sound. Many people believe this. In the beginning was the word. "Om" as the first and most fundamental sound. The big bang. [Sound waves that first shook the universe](#) have been recorded in recent history. People from different traditions and disciplines have landed on the idea that creation began with a sound, and is sustained with a sound. Well, if that's

true, it feels like that sound has changed. Our lives have not changed, but what if the pitch we live them at has?

Back to the issue of consequence. To experience consequences requires finality and meaning that our era seems fundamentally lacking in. The Trump admin's approach to policy can basically be summed up as "what are you going to do about it?" and this motto can essentially be extended to all sectors of politics, art, culture, and business right now. I think it's driving us all a little insane.



(Image: [Doug Wheeler](#)-Infinity Room)

When the temperature can only be raised, but never broken, you end up living at a literal fever-pitch, and with a fever comes the fever dreams. With no ending there can be no definition, and the boundaries of the real, the possible, the sacred all breakdown. We're all going a little nuts from a lack of finality and boundaries, and it's causing a lot of us to retreat to previously-comfortable borders of statehood, gender, and nationality to

impose a sense of order and control. All the while the pitch goes up, with no end in sight.

A lot of people watch what is happening in the world, on many fronts, in many places, with dismay. They are scared and horrified, and think that same fear and horror will inspire people to action. The thought goes something like “surely, people will become so outraged, so scared, so angry, that this fever will break” but I think this is fundamentally misguided. The fear and horror are the *moment*, not the *action*. When you listen to the Shepard Tone, you get more and more frightened, uneasy, paranoid. This feeling does not change that sound, and has no effect on when it will end. It is a loop you will be stuck in until you turn it off.

And that’s really where the fear is, isn’t it?

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