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Soundscapes

Listening to British and American Languages and Cultures

edited by Alessandra Calanchi

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Ushering in the Soundscape: For a Poetics of Listening across Time and Space

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In describing Kathleen Jamie’s poems, Faith Lawrence talks about “poetics of listening” (2015) and asserts that, in writing and understanding poetry, listening is crucial. This attitude conduces us to the topic of our volume: precisely from the listener’s perspective, structures of language and style and literary works emerge as relevant soundscapes.

The word “soundscape” was coined in 1969 by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, who then founded the World Soundscape Project at the interdisciplinary Communications Centre of the Simon Fraser University. The soundscape is the ever-present and more and more complex array of sounds and noises around us. Like a landscape assembles visual elements, a soundscape comprehends sonic events. Schafer, however, also states that the more the noises and sounds surround us, the less distinctively we can hear them. He therefore believes that we must relearn to listen attentively so that we can comprehend our own acoustic past and present, recognize soundmarks and symbols, and possibly create healthier environments for the future.

Soundscapes are crucial in our lives. They are an integral part of landscapes and also of whole cultures. The foundational myths of the ancient Mediterranean – sibyls, sirens, muses, and the like – are based on sound. Sound is central not only in our daily perception of the world, but, nowadays, also in many academic disciplines, such as ecology, philosophy, musicology, neurosciences, architecture, and geography, for instance. We can therefore label sonic events according to their specific features (hi-fi or lo-fi) or functions (descriptive or connotative), or to their area of pertinence (geography, biology, or technology, and also community, politics, religion, etc.). Recently, renewed interest in sound studies has created new and flexible interdisciplinary fields. Diverse branches of knowledge and new methodologies currently

allow us to investigate sound innovatively and therefore come to groundbreaking interpretations and descriptions of reality and of how it is represented and recorded, from tapes to soundwave tattoos.

Schafer's pioneering work culminated in his seminal project *The Soundscape* in 1977. Since then, the concept of soundscape has had a considerable impact on many different fields. In 1979, American musician and ecologist Bernie Krause started recording and archiving wild natural soundscapes from around the world in his Wild Sanctuary Project. His book *The Great Animal Orchestra* came out in 2012, alongside with *The Sound Studies Reader*, edited by Jonathan Sterne.

Acoustic studies have also strongly affected archaeology. More and more scholars now recognize the importance of sound in understanding the ancient cultures in which orality (and aurality) was prominent (see *Archaeoacoustics*, eds. Chris Scarre and Graeme Lawson 2006). In architectural studies, Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter's book *Spaces Speak: Are You Listening?* (2006), has revolutionized the appreciation of architecture from pre-history to the present by focusing on auditory spatial awareness and indicting the architects' ingrained habit of almost exclusively emphasizing the visual aspects of structures. Blesser and Salter contend that sound always interacts with space and that echo, reverberation and auditory memory are the foundations of "aural architecture". In 2010, Brandon LaBelle's book goes even further by listening to the modern city (underground, home, sidewalks, streets, etc.) and recognizing its sonic geography. In 2014, acoustic engineer Trevor Cox published a book entitled *Sonic Wonderland: A Scientific Odyssey of Sound*, which takes the reader on a fascinating journey throughout a number of sonic wonders around the world.

Recent and crucial contributions to sound studies actually come from science. In their book *Auditory Neuroscience: Making Sense of Sound* (2012), neuroscientists Jan Schnupp, Israel Nelken and Andrew King analyze the dynamics of perception and the neural bases of sound localization. Similarly, the seminal article "Soundscape Ecology: The Sense of Sound in the Landscape" (*BioScience*, 2011, authored collectively by B. C. Pijanowski *et al.*), examines sound and its effect on organisms within a specific land or marine environment. On closely related topics, Almo Farina's volume *Soundscape Ecology: Principles, Patterns, Methods and Applications* followed in 2014 (see also Truax and Barrett 2011).

Appropriately, the concept of soundscape has influenced how we interpret literature and film. Rife with noises, voices, music, and silence, literature

and film are privileged objects of analysis in sound studies. We have all experienced the importance of sound in poetry and the emotions that alliteration, assonance, or repetition convey; but sound is often equally important in prose as well, and certainly in film, which is per se a cluster of visual and auditory codes. Every text can be considered as a soundscape. Furthermore, in our analysis, the hybridizing potential of sound studies inevitably broaches issues of memory, ethnicity, class, religion, and gender in order to understand and contextualize identities, preserve cultural heritage, and offer major instruments of resistance (Mathes 2015).

Soundscape studies indeed pool scholars from different backgrounds: acoustics, audiology, psychology, speech science, or many other disciplines. Only few people are likely to be acquainted with the most complex laws of physics or the last development in neuroscience, but everybody knows that sounds originate from longitudinal air waves (Asimov 1993). Also, everybody can recognize voices, sounds, music, and silence. Such common experience, however, does not seem to find true equivalence in a language evidently biased towards vision with words like ‘evidence’, ‘imagination’, or ‘vision’. One could ‘imagine a sound’; but it would be an oxymoron, or, at best, a synesthesia. Edwin Gordon’s 1986 coin “audiation” (“the sensation of hearing or feeling sound when it is not physically present”) is all but common. For that reason, we are all deeply committed to reinforce the role and importance of soundscape studies in the educational community.

We therefore confirm our commitment to strengthen the role of soundscape studies as an interdisciplinary methodology in interpreting literature and the arts. In the United States, that role is already a *fait accompli*, given William R. Paulson’s *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information* (1988) and the more recent works by John M. Picker (*Victorian Soundscapes*, 2003) and Philipp Schweighauser (*The Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985*, 2006). In Europe, soundscape studies are getting more and more established, thanks to the periodical *Sonorités* and to associations like the Forum Klanglandschaft (FKL) and Tempo Reale. They have also gained a secure foothold in Italy with the monographs by Stefano Pivato (*Il secolo del rumore*, 2011), Marco Monari (*La piazza che non c’era*, 2013), and Leandro Pisano (*Nuove geografie del suono*, 2017), and with book series like “Convergenze: studi di musicologia e filosofia” (Edizioni dell’Orso) and “Soundscapes” (Galaad).

This issue of *Linguae &* constitutes a strong and valuable contribution to the international debate on sound studies and to the establishment of the dis-

cipline. Our authors test the interpreting power of sound analysis on literary texts and works of art from the eighteenth century to nowadays. The sensory experience of London cityscapes in the Eighteenth century is the object of Jan Marten Ivo Klaver's inquiry. His investigation of John Gay's *Trivia* (1716) offers a captivating insight into literary psychogeography and emphasizes the correspondence between noise and danger. Klaver contends that, in Gay's *Trivia*, however important light might be, sound actually gives an impressionistic quality to the text and underlines the passage from the pastoral genre to the mock georgic. Hicham Ali Belleili argues that, before the end of the eighteenth century, William Wordsworth's poetry evinces an auditory harmony that gets the reader closer to aural contemplation. Conversely, Federica Zullo focuses on rhythms, alliteration, and the use of anaphora and onomatopoeia to analyse and reconstruct the auditory environment in Charles Dickens's novel *Dombey and Son*.

In examining Henry David Thoreau's soundscapes, Paolo Bugliani offers a painstakingly structured analysis of the relations between animal voices and human introspection, phonosphere and wilderness, classical echoes and stridulation. His complex investigation addresses optic supremacy, ontology, and discourses about nature. Also on nineteenth-century literature, Rosella Mamoli Zorzi's article examines the representations of Venice in Henry James's novels as a multi-layered symphony of sounds, voices, and silences.

The twentieth century obviously presents a much more multifaceted soundscape, so to speak. In investigating the African American experience, two contributions converge, for instance, on the social responsibility of listening. In one of them, Adriano Elia examines the role of music in the development of identity awareness in Langston Hughes's works and focuses on the revolutionary connotations of blues and on its history. In the other, Carla Tempestoso sheds light on cultural discrimination, prejudice, and trauma in Caryl Phillips's radio plays by emphasizing the interplay between silence and the performing voice. New areas of research and interpretative theories emerge when we embrace provocative points of view, as it is the case with Maria Elisa Montironi's analysis of a feminist spin-off of *Hamlet*, which revisits a classic in the light of "theatre noise" theory, and with Ilaria Moschini and Johnny Wingstedt's socio-semiotic multimodal analysis of TV commercials.

Finally, two case studies on education reveal new and important perspectives on how sound studies can actively enhance teaching and learning. Maria Elisa Fina's project on the children section of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York investigates the soundscape thoroughly to broach

new learning strategies, from soundpainting to edutainment. Similarly, from the perspective of disability studies, Enrica Rossi demonstrates how the language of music and the art of listening can help overcome cognitive obstacles and foster effective communication.

The essays collected here confirm the ever-growing interest in soundscape studies and their current relevance. In examining a wide range of texts – from poetry to commercials, from novels to websites, from radio plays to pop music – and addressing some of the crucial issues of our society, these articles map the soundscapes of our cultures and help us realize how important it is to sit and listen to the world in order to know where we stand within it.

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