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Sound, Soundscapes, and Sound Art

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ABSTRACT

This short text has three main aims:

- 1. To rethink “sound” by presenting sound beyond the sonic, beyond the merely audible, by emphasizing its various societal roles, functions, and positions. As such I claim that the relation between living beings/humans and sound is a complex one and that we tend to forget the non-cochlear aspects of our sonic environment.**
- 2. To rethink the concept of “soundscape” as a sonic environment that doesn’t exist independently from the living beings that interact with it. Soundscapes can thus not be separated from one’s embodied experience of soundscapes; as a result of one’s activity, the constitution of a soundscape constantly changes. And in addition to this: experiencing, analyzing, and evaluating a soundscape is not limited to the audible events only but always already include political, economic, social, aesthetic, ethical, and many other relations to that environment as well.**
- 3. To rethink the role sound art can play in relation to soundscapes. Of course, sound art can be used to improve the sonic quality of a specific space or place. But sound art’s role can also encompass a thorough analysis and evaluation of an existing situation, a situation which is audible, but also complex and non-cochlear, i.e. political, social, ethical, etc.**

It should be clear that this text is work in progress. The thoughts presented here are not (yet) the result of thorough research, intensive literature study, or concrete case studies (although all this is not completely absent either). The text is first of all meant to raise discussion, to provoke new thoughts, to invite others to reflect on and criticize my initial ideas.

KEYWORDS: Sounds, Soundscapes, Sound Art, Non-Cochlear Sound Studies

INTRODUCTION: ON (INTER)NOISE AND TS 13.08

Noise as disorder. Noise disrupting the existing order, the status quo, an at least temporary harmony. This is how Jacques Attali in his famous book *Noise* from 1977 defined it. Noise is that what escapes prevailing norms, valid standards, current discourses, accepted values. And all this inside as well as outside the domain of music, inside and outside the domain of sound, inside and outside the domain of the audible.

Inter(-)noise would then mean something as being amidst noise, being between noises, emerged in noise, enveloped by noise, that is, being emerged in and enveloped by disharmony, the uncanny, the unorthodox, the experimental. And perhaps TS 13.08, this session on soundscapes from a Humanities and Arts perspective, can be considered as noise amidst of noise, a kind of meta- or hypernoise in that it deviates quite conspicuously from the dominant discourses and methodologies presented at this conference.

BEYOND NOISE REDUCTION

As the official Inter-Noise site states, this is all about noise control. The reduction or control of unwanted sounds in public spaces is usually equated with noise abatement measures and traditionally expressed in decibels. The more dB(A) a particular measure is able to suppress, the more efficient this measure is considered to be. While suppression indeed can be an effective way to control unwanted sounds, research makes clear that sound volume is not always the main cause of noise pollution. Specific frequencies and/or vibrations with a limited amount of dB(A) can also have a significant influence on how people experience a public sonic atmosphere. At the same time, loud sounds can mask other, more irritating ones and thus have a positive influence on the way a specific space is encountered. Loud sounds can be attractive too: lots of people expose themselves almost on a daily basis on EDM, Post-Punk, Noise Music, Death Metal, etc. music that, played live, often exceeds the regular health standards.

However, if controlling noise, music, and/or our sonic ambiance cannot or should not be reduced to influencing the sounds *in themselves*, we have to move our thinking beyond the mere sounding of sound as well: sounds speak beyond their sounding, their meaning and influence exceeds their audible features.

BEYOND THE SOUND OF SOUND

Proposition 1: Sound is connected to many aspects of our lives: we eat, sleep, play, travel, work, relax, communicate, socialize *in* sound. Self-evidently it cannot be disconnected from visual, tactile or olfactory perceptions either. The auditory atmosphere determines the behavior and perception of all living creatures to a great extent. Again, we not only perceive a soundscape, we perceive *in* a soundscape. Better yet, soundscapes and living being are co-existent: the one does not exist without the other.

Proposition 2: The relation between humans and sound is complex and this also goes for the problems humans may have with sound. However, complex problems often have no simple solutions; they require multifaceted approaches. Here, I limit myself to briefly list 8 “domains” that play a role in this relation between humans and sound.

- Acoustics. Specific features of sound can cause annoyance or irritation. In research the emphasis is often on volume, perhaps *because* this is easily measurable and can be controlled by rules and regulations. However, unwanted sounds are not always quantifiable through dBs. Said differently: the problem cannot always be located in the sound quality. It is not always the sound in itself that is unpleasant; it becomes unpleasant when audible in places where it shouldn't be heard. In other words, unpleasant or unwanted sound is relative to a situation and a place. Relatively soft sounds can be more annoying than loud sounds, e.g. because of frequency or (ir)regularity. While being in nature the music coming from a loudspeaker can be experienced as disturbing whereas the very same music will be valued positively when covering the sounds of machines or an airco system.
- Materials. Often it doesn't help when the source of one specific unwanted sound is tackled in isolation. The reflection of sound – a narrow street, lots of concrete and/or glass, huge buildings, a lack of planting, etc. – might *amplify* negative reactions. Increasing urbanization and traffic are not always in themselves the most problematic. Our sonic ambiance depends on contingent factors such as materials through which sounds reverberate.
- Aesthetics. The relation between sound and humans also has an aesthetic component, aesthetics regarded in the broad sense, namely as concerning the senses, in this case the ear in particular. Although important and interesting, the emphasis here shouldn't be so much on ideas of beauty vs ugliness; rather, questions such as “what am I hearing?” “What is it doing to me?” “What do these sounds mean to me?” are the relevant ones, not trying to identify the

sources of individual sounds, but the sonic atmosphere as a whole. “Can I distinguish between many different sounds?” “Are some sounds being masked?” “In which sound spectrum are most sounds of this particular sonic atmosphere located?” “What would I like to change in this sonic atmosphere?”

- Singularity. The relation between human being and sound is unique to a certain extent. Each human being brings in her own demographic data, perception, emotions, lifestyle, preferences, etc. Additionally, these singular features are constantly subject to changes, e.g. due to day, time, temperature, season, events, experiences, memories, etc. This complicates the simple reliance on an individual’s expression of her experience of sound and a sonic ambiance. Add to this more overarching cultural factors: people who have been growing up in Delhi, Cairo, Shanghai, or Sao Paulo may find Dutch, Danish or Finnish complaints on noise pollution quite exaggerated.
- Economy. The triangle sound-human/experience-economy is evident. Already during the Industrial Revolution when the overall sound volume increased due to the introduction of machines, trains, and steamers, people who benefitted economically from these inventions didn’t experience these noises as disturbing, while complaints came from e.g. philosophers and (other) academics who argued that they needed silence to be able to get their work done.
- Politics. Sound has a political component. I refer here not to the noise of demonstrations, revolutions, and wars (it is interesting to notice how Murray Schafer connected war and noise, while especially the 21st century knows a transition towards more and more silent weapons), nor to national anthems, or the use of music during political gatherings. On a more *micro-political* level it is about something else: control. Who determines what sounds where and when will be audible? Who has influence on such decisions? And who will – literally – not be heard? In a more general sense one could say that the more control someone has on her sonic environment, the less negative its impact.
- Social. Closely connected to the political role of sound is its social function. Sound (music included) creates identity and, therefore, togetherness (think of e.g. youth culture, motor clubs, football supporters, and national/ethnic/religious groups). However, simultaneously other groups are excluded (elderly people, supporters of other teams, other religions, etc.). Sound unites people (only seldom we listen alone); sound selects (who will/can/may hear this?); but sound also isolates (we cannot hear others, otherness, other sounds) and it thus can be a-social.

- Ethics. Does sound play a role in ethical or moral behavior? If ethics, as Jacques Derrida states, equals hospitality, hospitality towards the other or towards otherness, what can sound contribute? Or, from a rather negative perspective, how does sound hinder potential hospitality? Here, too, domination becomes important: who or what is being included or excluded in a sonic environment? The question about ethics can be extended to investigating the disciplining role of music in (semi-)public spaces and the subconscious influence of the ultra- and infrasounds of ATM machines, metal detectors, advertisement panels, and neon signs.

It is my conviction that the complex and various relations between sounds, the sonic environment, and living beings affect the way we should think about the term “soundscape”. This issue will be addressed in the next section.

RETHINKING SOUNDSCAPES

In 2006 the British anthropologist Tim Ingold published a short article entitled “Against Soundscape” in which he presented four main reasons to abandon this concept of soundscape. First, the way we experience our environment is not sliced up along the lines of our sensory organs; the various parts of our sensory system are always working in tandem and are closely connected. Second, a landscape may be audible, but to be *aural* it first needs to be rendered by a technique of sound art or recording. The ears are organs of observation; therefore, hearing shouldn’t inhere in recordings. Three, sound, in Ingold’s view, is neither mental nor material, but a phenomenon of experience: we are immersed in, and commingling with, the world in which we live. Hence, sound is not the object but the medium of our perception; it is what we hear in. Four, and closely connected to Ingold’s third objection, the term soundscape seems to place the emphasis on the surface of the world. However, sound is an infusion of the medium in which we find our being and through which we move: we don’t hear rain, we hear *in* it. These objections might also lead to a rethinking of emplacement through the sonic.

Although I can agree – at least to a certain extent – with Ingold’s criticism, I don’t deem it necessary to abandon the concept of “soundscape” altogether, even though alternatives have already been developed, e.g. by Gernot Böhme and Jean-Paul Thibaud. “Soundscape” is not a

stable concept with a universal and eternal signifier; its meaning varies, changes, develops, transforms, e.g. due to the context in which it is presented.

Of course, “soundscape” is the auditory counterpart of the more commonly used term “landscape” as Ingold remarks. However, one could also add it to the list with which anthropologist Arjun Appadurai mapped out the complex order of a contemporary global cultural economy: ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, financescapas, and ideoscapas. It is clear that there are many conceivable “scapes.” The point I want to make – and this brings me back to complex relation between humans and sounds – is that all these “scapes” are analytically separable but often merge in one’s actual, embodied, everyday experience of an environment. Said differently – and here I follow Ingold – a (sound)scape is not an independent, pre-existing (sonic) environment in which fragmented, divided, and nonunified subjects live of necessity, or through which they inevitably move: by inhabiting a soundscape, by experiencing it, by being affected by it, we simultaneously create, construct, and affect it. The interaction between soundscape and living being is a dynamic process in which both are formed, informed, and transformed; both are in a constant state of becoming. As Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch write in *The Embodied Mind*, we “enact a world as a domain of distinctions that is inseparable from the structure embodied by the cognitive system” (1993: 140). Soundscapes can thus not be separated from one’s embodied experience of soundscapes; as a result of one’s activity, the constitution of a soundscape constantly changes. Perception contributes to the enactment of this surrounding auditory world, and this goes for both the acoustic and non-acoustic variables. Experiencing, analyzing, and evaluating a soundscape is not limited to the audible events only but always already include political, economic, social, aesthetic, ethical, and many other relations to that environment as well.

Experiencing, analyzing, and evaluating – this can take place in many different ways. One way, often forgotten, neglected and/or marginalized is through art. Here: through sound art. The last part of this text contains a short meditation on the role sound art can play in sound studies.

SOUND ART AND/IN SPACE

By concentrating on the non-cochlear effects of sonic interventions in public spaces (instead of focusing attention on the sounds *in themselves*), micro-political and heterotopical workings become noticeable. On a meta level this could lead to a rethinking of (public) spaces: experiencing space through sound (as well as sounds through space) turns space from a static and stable pre-given into an unstable, ever-changing (counter-)site, (un)shaped by audible vibrations.

Besides offering a reorientation on space through the sonic, micro-political effects become even more discernible when we concentrate on the behavior of the public encountering these spaces and art works. In other words, sound art in public space is able to generate processes creating preconditions for alternative and unknown relations between people and environment, relations which evoke new experiences and meanings. Locative art has the capability to establish non-linear and poetic relationships between participative audiences and physical surroundings.

Sound art works might then intervene in theoretical discussions and debates about demarcations, identity, and definition. Through the production and reception of art certain irrefutable judgments on architecture and spatial perception can be readjusted. As such, the effect and meaning of sound art can never be confined completely to the purely audible: art becomes research resulting in new knowledge.