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Sophie Arkette

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What is This?

# Sounds Like City

*Sophie Arkette*

> Anything in our world that moves vibrates air.
>     If it moves in such a way that it oscillates at more than about 16 times a second this movement is heard as sound.
>     The world, then, is full of sounds. (Schafer, 1969: 5)

> Auditory space has no favoured focus. It's a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing. It is not pictorial space, boxed-in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment. (Carpenter, 1973: 35)

H OW DO we describe city spaces? There has been, in recent years, a prolixity of differing views on the treatment of this question in which two opposing general tendencies stand out: the reductionist and the phenomenological positions. Reductionist theorists argue that a city is no more than a lattice of physical enclosures, apertures, planes, inter-sections bound together by the regulatory force of the Cartesian grid. A phenomenological approach, on the other hand, can provide a theory of wider scope; it can include in the description of a city's attributes the corpo-real, the sensual and psychological aspects of subjective experience, as well as the broader cultural characteristics of the different communities and subcultures which contribute to the diversity of city spaces. From this point of view, the reductionist position appears locked within its own rigidity, creating ossified spaces by relying on the method of deductive analysis, rather than on direct sensory experience. Non-reductive theories (of which there are many different kinds) align themselves with the notion that a city is not just the sum total of buildings and streets; indeed, it is not generated by the neat ontological division of container and contained: metaphorical space can supervene upon the physical divisions of the urban metropolis.

The phenomenological view adopts a body-centred paradigm in which there is no clear dichotomy between the experiencing subject and the

external world. On this reading, time and space are perceived as fluid rather than immutably constituted. Space does not have an a priori character; it is defined and moulded by the subjectivity and social consciousness of those who experience and inhabit it. This has significant implications for understanding the role of sound as a component of urban experience. For the phenomenologist there is no veil of sense-data interposed between the epistemological subject and the objects of perception. Instead of space in the abstract, we may invoke the much more mercurial concept of place. Place allows particular localities to be defined in terms of their history and social use, investing them with cultural meanings and values and making them available for active intervention and transformation.

Place can be used as a concept to define a geographical area on the scale of nation-states, or the intimate domain of the home. It can mean the reconfiguring of social boundaries. For a Jewish community, for example, the demarcation of the Eruv redefines an existing public space and creates a sanctuary as an extension of the sacred space of home or the synagogue. Ritual and custom are attributes that have the effect of strengthening attachment to places. A sense of place can also be generated through subcultural re-appropriation, such as the use of the concrete ramps and steps underneath London's South Bank centre by skateboarders. Place fuses the real with the mythical, the virtual with the actual; it is a space which encourages flights of imagination, as for instance in Robert J. Yudell's description of the Chrysler building 'Here we have not only the vertical differentiation of the building but chunky setbacks which conjure landscapes or grand stairways. We can imagine scaling, leaping and occupying its surface and interstices' (Bloomer and Moore, 1977). The essential point, I think, of this phenomenological approach, is to show that it is not the space itself that changes; rather it implies a transformation in attitude to space and how we define it.

Our climate, culturally speaking, is increasingly defined in terms of visual space. Media and communication for the most part are equated with billboards, television and recently DVD. Aural space has, for the moment, become merely a ubiquitous presence, to be registered peripherally.

However, I will argue that sound, especially within the context of the urban environment, is never a neutral phenomenon. Each sound is imbued with its own lexical code: sound as sign, symbol, index; as ostensibly defining a personal territory in the case of the ghettoblaster or car stereo; as creating a portable soundscape in the case of the Walkman.

Phenomenology has the potential to play a critical role in contributing towards an aural definition of space, but its impact has yet to be fully realized. There has been, however, a group of practitioners who have sought to articulate a humanist account of the sonic environment. Essentially, soundscape design aims to increase people's awareness of their own sonic environment in order that they might play an active role in its subsequent transformation: eliminating noise which desensitizes the ear, while preserving sounds whose semantic signals play a defining role for a community or

district. Preservation of sound signals whose referents have a historical dimension is seen as a mandatory requirement for obtaining a clear fidelity environment. In this sense, their agenda is ecologically motivated: sound objects rooted in the past take on the status of endangered species, and the active role of the soundscaper is seen not only as drawing attention to this fact, but also as capturing these sounds on magnetic tape, for future posterity. Soundscape studies, thus, stand in contrast to the many noise abatement organizations whose directives endeavour to limit the general amplitude level, irrespective of the kinds of sound emitted. Indeed, many directives rely upon an atomistic model of sound from which they derive a qualitative schema. This somewhat contradictory type of method essentially bypasses the emotive responses of the listener, instead treating sound as linear trajectories crossing and recrossing a landscape. The terms reflection, refraction, periodicity are frequently used within this discourse, contributing to the objectifying of the soundspace. Strategies which rely upon the Cartesian model of space tend to describe how sounds are diffused around a space rather than attempting to understand the social and economic motivations behind why, for example, some people choose to amplify music at high levels. So, too, questions surrounding social space are rarely asked, for instance, whether sound is the manifestation of underlying tensions between communities.

One of the main exponents of soundscape studies is the Canadian composer and theorist R. Murray Schafer. As the initiator of the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University in the 1970s, he sought to classify urban and rural sonic data; to chart a sound's evolution through history, in order to find, as he put it 'whether there were any particular or recurrent patterns that would make it possible to determine the principles of soundscape design' (Schafer, 1994). Declaring the world to resemble an orchestrated composition, he invites us to take assertive action to change its form and content. In what way might we improve the sonic environment? All well and good. But here the objectivity of Schafer's enquiry breaks down and gives way to what I will call urban prejudice: a point of view whereby industrial, commercial and traffic sounds are deemed sonic pollutants, and subsequently allotted to the garbage heap. For instance, his central thesis pivots around a fundamental division: Hi-fi and Lo-fi landscapes. Hi-fi is, in Schafer's view, a favourable signal-to-noise ratio associated with rural/agrarian landscapes. And, because of the low noise ambience and limited acoustic masking the listener is allowed to plunge back into space. Deep perspective not only increases reception of sonic information, it strengthens the symbiosis between landscape and sounding-object: the way a sound is reflected, refracted or absorbed by the landscape endows the sound with particular acoustical characteristics: for instance, a mountainside can act as a giant sounding board, magnifying the slightest whisper. A landscape is in effect etched on to the sound: extending a sound's natural life, filtering out frequencies or amplifying its internal fluctuations.

Lo-fi, on the other hand, refers to the compacted sonic strata generated

by cityscapes. And, from Schafer's perspective, sonic compression leads to a reduction in the listener's aural space as distant sound material is erased. Cities, therefore, create impenetrable soundwalls isolating individuals from their acoustic environment. When listeners can no longer echo-locate themselves, the sense of place and identity is eroded. Long sound envelopes, a characteristic of Hi-fi landscapes, are severely clipped or masked, to be replaced by omni-directional bass drones. The drone becomes, for Schafer, the symbol of aural modernity exemplifying flatness, artificiality and stasis. The quintessential modern drone, the air-conditioner, lacks both a point of entry and departure which is inherent in any natural sound: attributes which inform the listener of the sound's origin. Moreover, the continuous line is perceived as stationary, only irregularities (sonic grain) or pulsations convey the sense of passing time.

While Schafer's project is full of acute observation, much of which I agree with, I have fundamental misgivings about his approach. To say that the urban supervenes upon the natural soundscape, and that urban sounds can be cleaned up to resemble natural sounds is to misread the dynamics of city spaces. A city wouldn't exist if it mirrored agrarian sonic space. Similarly, to claim that natural sound can be sharply delineated from urban man-made sounds raises the question of what exactly constitutes a purely natural sound, and why are these natural sounds given a privileged status denied to urban sounds. Schafer has envisaged clear-cut divisions regarding the separation of natural from man-made. But the distinction may not be as clear-cut as he might suppose. For example, the mobile phone is, under the Schaferian definition, classed within the man-made domain, while birdsong is classed in the natural domain. What happens when birdsong imitates mobile-phone jingles? If a row of trees chosen for their particular sound quality is landscaped to run the circumference of a London city square, would the soundscape, according to Schaferian criteria, be man-made or natural?

To say that cityscapes can be reduced to a matrix of soundwalls is to misread the notion of city. City space has been and is constantly being carved up into communities defined by economic, cultural, ethnic, religious divisions and consequently acoustic profiles and soundmarkers are in constant transition. Equally, amplitude and density level change, sometimes radically, according to the time of day or the day of the week. Walk around the commercial London districts of Bank or Clerkenwell on a weekend and you'll find that these hollow spaces resonate footsteps in a number of distinct ways; from the sharp attack as sound is reflected off glass to the softer sonic envelopes as sound collides with, and is partially absorbed by, stone. On the other hand, walking through Brick Lane market on a Sunday morning you can hear myriad vocalized advertisements, each voice having its own distinct inflection, modulation and rhythmic pattern.

Each community has sets of sound markers which reinforce its own identity; each district has its own sonic profile, even if that profile is not a permanent feature. These soundmarkers may change: the eclipse of the

church bell in London may be the result of secularization, but this is by no means a universal phenomenon. In Venice, the sense of time and religion is audibly reinforced by the toll of the bells. It is, perhaps, still the city's dominant sound profile, stretching out across the many islands. Each bell cluster marks out a district through its tonal or contrapuntal idiosyncrasies, one of the bells of Giudecca being a semi-tone flat. In Europe, bells have over the centuries come to embody an archtetypal sound stretching back for centuries; they have been the dominant acoustic signals for communities, reinforcing the political and religious powers of the Church. They also served during the colonial period to demarcate ecclesiastical and therefore civilized territory from the uncivilized heathen domains that lie outside the bell's acoustic boundaries.

Alain Corbin's fascinating book *Village Bells* (1998) paints a vivid picture of the symbiotic relation between the church bell and rural life in 18th-century France. Here the bell appears as a sacred envoy to God, a call to prayer, a summons to a host of angels, a representative through its tonal qualities of the well-being of a community, which could even be silenced as a threat against a recalcitrant community. Communities played out their conflicts through the sound of the bell, each village trying to outdo the others' harmonic variations or through the ability to encroach upon the others' acoustic space. Acoustic battles were not only fought out by neighbouring communities but also between Catholics and Protestants. When the Catholics of Aubais (Gard) in 1845 decided to replace their old church bell, seeing that the Protestants soon after followed suit, they retaliated by introducing the double-ring. Some communities reinforced their solidarity and autonomy by preferring to recast a worn bell in the village square rather than bringing in a 'used' bell from another community.

These days the power of the bell has been usurped by other amplified sounds, but there are still remnants of ecclesiastical authority. One of my research quests took me to Westminster Cathedral and the adjacent bookshops. While I was ferreting for information from the bookshop's two sales assistants the bell began its hourly toll, at which point they promptly disengaged from the conversation and proceeded in unison to chant a short liturgy. For a while we stood suspended within an enclave of sacred space immune to the rumble and clatter of Victoria Street.

To return to my above-mentioned misgivings about Schafer's description of the urban environment. I would maintain that the sonic environment, for all its compacted low-frequency ambience, has not reached a saturation level whereby we become alienated from it. Rather, isolation or displacement from an acoustic environment has, to a greater extent, been achieved by gadgets such as the Walkman or the mobile phone. The mobile phone has magnified an already existing staccato environment: continuous conversation is being sliced into discrete fragments of thought; language has been truncated into what is now termed the 'sound-bite'. Commonly observed prefixes of mobile conversations are 'I'm on the bus/a train/walking down Monmouth Street, I'll be with you in 5 minutes'. These are becoming

characteristic attitudes towards nomadic behaviour. Communication technology has, on a first reading, freed us from a particular location, but has also intensified our desire for self-ascription; the commuter's journey has become a succession of location bulletins and short fragments of narratives. Possessing a mobile phone almost requires an individual, by necessity, to 'stay in aural reach'; to keep those with whom they are potentially connected informed of their impending arrival. Acoustically, the mobile phone is still in its infancy. While manufacturers have striven to invest their products with rapidly sophisticated textable imagery and design, its sound fidelity has hardly progressed. Although the bandwidth with which individuals communicate is wide enough for speech intelligibility, it lacks the frequency range (especially the bass frequencies) needed for spatial closeness. Consequently, and perhaps ironically, the mobile phone aurally reinforces distance between persons.

Audio technology of this kind has on a larger scale reconfigured community spaces. Community, which has traditionally been associated with a close-knit group of people all within audible reach, and further connected by a group of sounds which make that community distinctive, for example the church bell, has now become extended to refer to distant groups of people bound together through a technological mediator. The mark of the passage of time is suppressed through the transfer of sound waves to electrical carriers of data silently traversing continents. Communities who ride on electronic space, through video-conferencing, chat rooms, mobile phones and so on, can be seen as part of the cultural drive towards dissolving the corporeal. Technology mediates between the physical space of encounters, throwing up in its wake modified representations. At least aural technology provides an aperture for animated vocal utterances and so provides room for extra-linguistic interpretation, something denied to Internet communities.

The personal stereo offers perhaps the best example of a growing schism between what we see and what we hear. It might be used to transcend a repetitive journey to work, as a way to explore uncharted sonic terrain, or as a way of superimposing an often faster beat on our own internal heartbeat. Whatever the reason, listening to music directly fed into the ears creates the illusion of enlarging our own physical scope.

Acoustic enclaves can be a means of retreat. The use of the ansaphone as a call sensor, especially in New York, acts as a modern-day fortress to preserve privacy. Other enclaves could include the pub; its amplified music can be used as a shroud to wrap around an intimate conversation.

A city, like any other complex structure, creates contradictions; whilst it maintains sonic enclaves, it has had to absorb new viscous technologies as society demands mobility. The fallout from being a mobile society is loss of territory and home, and an increase of neutral space. Here is the paradox: we demand greater fluidity in which to interact but we also demand identity and security. The irony of this dilemma is that sound, as the ultimate liquid form, is coming to represent the physical presence of home territory. Radio, with its repetitive format, provides individuals with a secure framework

within which to regulate and pace their lives. It could equally be regarded as a surrogate companion which accompanies the individual in work and domestic tasks. Its reassuring presence alludes to the individual's flight from silence into the safety of word and music; sound is used to ward off the existential threat of a nihilistic lull. On this interpretation sound becomes an index for the presence of animate objects outside the realm of the subject.

Different radio stations incorporate different modes of presentation: Radio 3, targeted at the middle-bracketed sector of society, exhibits a slow tempo with often clear-cut breaks between programmes. Presenters, in respectful tones and subdued inflections, impart to the audience their knowledge of musical genres or particular pieces. Through formality and diction a certain spatial distance is set up between the transmitter and listener which stands in contrast with stations such as Jazz FM, whose brand of aural image is centred around the often full-bodied and breathy voice of the presenter. As with the close-miked situations of jazz vocalists, the audible flow of breath and slight nuances in vocal texture convey close spatial proximity to the listener. Commercial stations such as Capital and Virgin offer a format full of cross-fades and fast-talk. DJs often work in teams, talking and cracking jokes among themselves in an attempt to dispel the image of radio as a unilateral disembodied voice. The inception of phone-ins has also strengthened the reciprocal relation between listener and presenter. Instead of treating radio as an ambient soundscape, listeners are encouraged to take a hand in shaping their particular acoustic community, whether by presenting an opinion on today's political climate or describing personal experiences.

Within the larger picture, commercial music is often used as a backdrop in shops, spilling out onto the street. To walk down Camden High Street on a Saturday afternoon is to experience a continuous pulse of contrapuntal rhythms; bubbles of acoustic space expand and contract in rapid succession, first on the right then on the left.

Commercial music, as defined by soundscape theorist Ola Stockfeld, plays a significant role in defining sub-territories. Dance music played in shops demarcates youth territory as well as being a centrifugal force excluding other sectors of society. Supermarkets as places without any specific target policy play a nondescript kind of music devoid of both focus and acoustic perspective. Like the sound of the air conditioner it has no beginning and no terminus; a music designed specifically not to be listened to. Professions without any fixed location tend to mark territory with portable radios or ghettoblasters. Ola Stockfeld gives a vivid description of the dynamic tension music creates on the Swedish building site. Chiefly he cites the generation gap between the older workers, who were not brought up in a media-driven age and consequently are distracted by the presence of music, and the younger members whose needs include music as a way of stimulating productivity and to project identity. Other instances of conflict surface when workers with contrasting musical tastes fight for acoustic domination: 'some building sites became virtual musical battlefields with

twelve or fifteen ghettoblasters competing with each other' (Stockfeld, 1994). Unfortunately, Stockfeld's concluding remarks somewhat beg the question: sound prohibition could only be a cosmetic gesture rather than addressing the root cause: fundamental conflicts of a transforming society.

There is a growing schism between the space that physical objects occupy, and the acoustic space that is taken up with a sounding object. The amount of acoustic space taken up by an individual can tell us a great deal about the individual: the stereo system of a passing car, played at high volume, encroaches into the environment far more than the car itself. In this instance, acoustic space may extend to a 40-metre radius around the vehicle; the high amplitude level eclipsing all other acoustic activities. Sonic space does not follow the same rules as physical space. Sound cannot be contained within four walls unless the room is highly absorbent; walls only act as filters, filtering out high frequencies.

The consequences of living where physical space is at a premium, where terrace houses are carved up into flats or bedsits, where walls become flimsy partitions, are that the only way to extend your home territory is to imagine that you are in a larger space by raising the stereo or TV volume. The lateral flow of sonic material including domestic sounds as well as music is now a condition that we constantly have to adapt to. Depending on amplitude, a neighbour's stereo could function either as another layer of ambient environment or as sonic intrusion, giving the feeling that your private space is no longer your own.

This leads us, finally, to a question about silence. Schafer and his colleagues are apt to condemn cities for eroding silence. Their ecological approach appears to treat silence as an endangered species; something that must be preserved by maintaining habitats for its incubation and growth. Silence, in this light, has become a quantifiable phenomenon; a view which seems antithetical to Schafer's main tenets. How is silence to be preserved? What constitutes a silent environment? If silence alludes to an acoustic purity, do cityscapes contain any form of uncontaminated quiet? The composer John Cage sought to understand the definition of silence by entering an anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Instead of being aware of the absence of sound he was confronted by two audible frequencies: those of his nervous system and blood circulation. As a response to this experience Cage wrote his 'silent' piece, 4'33", notable for its absence of recognizable musical material, celebrating instead contingent environmental sounds: the scrape of a chair, a cough, the doppler effect of a passing train, the slow decay of the sound of a closing door. Cage inverts established protocol: noise becomes music, audience becomes performer, and the term 'silence' is exposed as purely nominal. His paradigm shift not only extends the listener's aural horizon but also transforms his/her attitude to music in general: listening to sounds as opposed to musical argument; focusing on the scrape of a violin rather than on pitch relationships.

Libraries and churches have become significant places to preserve a quiet environment. Libraries fulfil a requirement for studious research, and

churches respect the need for quiet contemplation. Churches and cathedral spaces are particularly interesting in cities because they are among the few spaces which stretch time. Long reverberation times affect actions within the space, slowing movement and speech; small incidental sounds are magnified, allowing the listener to appreciate internal harmonic fluctuations as the tone decays. The acoustic ability to stretch sound has several different effects: speech which allows time for the words to hang in the air before evaporating out of audible range can appear more weighty and monumental, even rhetorical. Within these spaces incidental sound material, sounds which we may treat as aural dust, footfalls or the occasional cough, are also given heightened presence through filtering and natural amplification. Lengthening a sound's life has invested it with a reverential sanctity that is usually reserved for ecclesiastical objects. The church as acoustic vessel tends to give the worshipper a multi-sensory experience of the sacred. Music theorist Kurt Blaukopf has suggested that sound could be seen as a mediator between congregation and sacred ritual. Low-frequency non-directional sound helps to bind a community together:

> This directness of sounds that cannot be located contributes significantly to the social effect of the musical-liturgical event. The anonymity of the sound source built into the architecture is the acoustic guarantee for the internalizing of church norms and, at the same time, the basis for the view that comprehends church liturgy as part of the heavenly liturgy. (Blaukopf, 1982: 182)

So, what is an urban soundscape? I have described various aspects of what constitutes an urban sonic fabric. Schafer's approach has merit insofar as it has defined terms which enable a listener to decipher the aural landscape. However, embedded in his work is a romantic bias towards antiquarian or rural soundscapes, as if these are assumed to be more refined than their modern-day equivalents. While Schafer's energy is spent defending the case for cleaning up urban pollutants, other issues, such as whether sound can aid our understanding of social relationships between communities, get left aside. These aspects are examined in the work of both Corbin and Stockfeld, and surprisingly these reveal similar tendencies in asserting the significance of acoustic territory.

Important for me is the notion that aural space is both tactile and ephemeral: it cannot be contained within fixed boundaries. Sound objects can be electronically magnified, replicated and scattered like dust over an entire cityscape. Aural space should be celebrated as the most liquid of spaces, offering a model for the kind of fluidity that a whole range of other disciplines aspire to.

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