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Jean-Paul Thibaud

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Giving Voice to Urban Atmospheres

Jean-Paul Thibaud

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Largo da Carioca in downtown Rio de Janeiro on a hot November afternoon. A disconcerting experiment with one very simple instruction: cross this square blindfolded with the help of an attentive guide and, at the same time, describe one's immediate sensations and impressions. This means walking as if blind for about 20 minutes and having your impressions recorded. The experiment produces a series of sound recordings featuring the voice of the blind stroller along with the noises from Largo da Carioca in the background. Note the stifling heat and the uneven ground...impressions concerning the cries of hawkers and the noise of traffic...all sorts of remarks that attempt to put into words what is perceived and felt along the way.

However, what if we also listened to the voices themselves, their melody and rhythm, their hesitations, intonations, laughing, silence, exclamations and interjections...the intermittent vocal flows that describe the body in motion to the keen ear? What if we focused on the textures and sounds of the spoken word with its different inflections, dynamics and accents? What if we paid greater attention to the perceptible hum of background vocals on the recording? This could be presented in terms of the voice as expression and production of ambiances - or better still - the *ambient voice*.

In addition to what is actually said – i.e., the semantic content – we are attempting to listen to the musicality of the spoken word from the perspective of the senses. We are not interested in the timbre of the voice itself as the signature of a specific body, but in the variations and fluctuations of the voice in a situation, as shifts taking place in an ambiance. So this involves giving vent to the sensitive body in one's dealings with the ambient environment; the effort of, and undertaking of movement; the affective tonalities of experiences in progress and problems encountered; adjusting the voice to what is heard; paying attention to certain events; maintaining contact with the interlocutor, etc. In a nutshell, a myriad of phonic "gestures" that accompany and embody public life and render the dynamics of places, flows, publics and exchanges audible. So, without attempting to compile an exhaustive list, here are four types of particularly clear and striking phonic "gestures".

- **Capturing gesture:** a first listening reveals gestures that aim to *capture the attention* of passers-by. During the walk across the square, a series of interjections punctuate the descriptions that make it possible to start another comment. Speech does not flow in an unbroken manner but leaves room for silences of varying lengths depending on the nature and diversity of the surrounding stimuli. These speech-triggers – "ha!", "well...", "here..." highlight the moments when and how the attention of passers-by is fixed. All that is needed is street music or the hailing of a street seller somewhere in the soundscape for the passer-by to suddenly enter a darker zone where they encounter an obstacle to being able to speak again. There are also cases where speech is merely suspended: the passer-by has momentarily stopped speaking but continues to study an event or a phenomenon without putting it into words. Silence here indicates that the focus of attention is in progress, a lingering focus on what has been noticed that makes it more difficult to speak at the same time, e.g., when one hears other passers-by gradually approaching and then moving away. Because the ambiance in Largo da Carioca is a stimulating and dynamic one, it throws up frequent and diverse capturing gestures and gives rise to numerous micro events and shifts in attention. We can define it here as an amplified attention grabbing space.

- **Articulation gesture:** a second listening points up articulation gestures that reveal practical ways of *physical engagement*. This time the voice gives expression to a body in

motion with all its tensions, fluidity and inertia – movements and series of movements. As an acoustic body, it extends and accompanies, renders and reinitialises the physical engagement involved in crossing the square. As such, although Largo itself does not leave much of a vocal trace along the way – the fluidity of the recording prevails here – this is not true at the periphery. The broken footpaths and uneven surfaces give rise to a rhythmical and melodious modulation of speech. Merely stepping up onto the path becomes audible and bears out the effort made by the passer-by. The voice takes part in the strollers' physical engagement and merely expresses what is being accomplished in its own way and this allows us to retrace the entire crossing of Largo step by step, word by word. The crossing is quite bumpy at its outer limits but easier on the actual square itself and not especially challenging physically. For present purposes, Largo may be defined as a relatively moderate space in terms of physical engagement.

- **Accentuation gesture:** a third listening focuses on accentuation gestures that reveal fluctuations in *situational intensity*. The Largo is particularly animated during rush hour periods and this gives rise to numerous occasions for intensification of experience: emerging dancing music, nearby stationary traffic that suddenly starts to move again, thickening crowds, surrounding voices becoming more insistent, rumblings of street theatre, etc. All of these situations contribute to intensifying experience during the crossing and maintaining a high level of tension and stimulation. The voice tends to accompany this collective dynamic by switching to a hastier rhythm, rising in tone and adopting a happier tone, and giving greater emphasis to what is being said. For example, the repetitive cries of street sellers sometimes turn into a mantra and the passer-by cannot help assimilating these and memorising their every inflection. In brief, the voice expresses not only the passer-by's physical engagement but the hold and tonality of the surrounding atmosphere. In a nutshell, Largo may be defined here as a space of high situational intensity.

- **"Tuning" gesture:** a fourth listening reveals "tuning" gestures that bring out diverse forms of *surrounding dynamics*. The most obvious example is of course the many times strollers vocally imitate music they have heard by playing a passage or reproducing an especially catchy rhythm. The music that has been heard can generate an impetus that is very close to vocal imitation. However, there are also other phenomena in which the fit and timbre of the voice operate via transduction by expressing and embodying the dynamic of a sensory phenomenon from the ambient environment. For example, when the wind gets stronger, the passer-by remarks on this and pronounces "wiiiiiiiiind" in such a way as to make it last: he or she reproduces the type of weather that they experience through their voice. In other words, the mention of "the wind" is not merely a way of indicating its presence, it is also a means for those who experience it of expressing its existence from a temporal perspective (the elongated manner of pronouncing the word "wind" emulates the content of the gust of air itself). In other cases, the accelerated speech of the blind passer-by exacerbates the sudden acceleration of traffic or the plethora of nearby voices. Although Largo is criss-crossed by a multitude of ambient flows, each with its own dynamic (musical tempo, pedestrian allure, passing currents of air, incessant rumour, etc.), it does not appear especially desynchronised. For our present purposes, we would define it as a rhythmical, highly resonant space.

So, what lessons should we draw from this attempt at listening to the ambient voice of Largo da Carioca? First, the sheer plasticity and power of vocal expression in a given situation is perfect for pointing up the atmospheric nuances of places. This gives rise to various different impregnations that colour behaviour and sensitise experiences; clear focuses that frame vocal expression and accompany the passer-by throughout the experiment. But here again, does this not point us towards an *ethnophony of ambiances*? In this regard, the various aforementioned phonic gestures relating to capturing attention, physical engagement, situational intensity and surrounding dynamics constitute a few of the many registers that participate *in situ* in sensitive experience. A singular listening channel needs to be developed, one that is highly sensitive to the tonalities of ambient situations and

changes in the situated voice. On a concluding note, does the voice not act like an extraordinarily powerful resonator of the infinitesimal variations that comprise the urban soundscape?