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Jean-Paul Thibaud

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Towards an Art of Impregnation

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Jean-Paul Thibaud

There is increasing common ground between the art world and the social sciences. This is particularly true of work related to sonic spaces, sensory environments and everyday aesthetics. Shared questions are surfacing, enabling us to take advantage of cross-breeding and the contribution of the two perspectives. The field of urban ambiances has featured largely in these exchanges between artistic creation and scientific research. Whether one defines ambiance as the sensory atmosphere of place, the pervasive quality of a situation or the affective tonality of an environment, the question of *in situ* experience is inevitably raised. This means that an ambiance is always situated, set in a particular space and time, which it helps to singularize and qualify in return. Consider the buzz of a market or railway station, or the way an airport, cathedral or public square sounds. A singular atmosphere emerges from each of these spaces, expressing and inducing a way of being together.

How does this relate to the sonic background which accompanies us in time and in which we take part? In what way do such ambiances affect us in our daily lives? How may we open our ears to the atmospheric existence of the contemporary world? In asking such questions I intend to introduce the notion of ambiance in the field of sonic studies. My aim is to focus on the overall salience of ambient sound and to better understand how it infuses and pervades everyday urban experience.

My purpose is not to define the notion of ambiance but rather to query its efficacy, to cast light on the effects it produces and its hidden potential. So this involves both acknowledging the intangible, evanescent character of ambiance while underlining its power to act and transform. After all, we may say that an ambiance is moving, calming, disturbing or compelling. In short, though ambiance is difficult to grasp and circumscribe, it nevertheless remains pregnant and effective. The main point I wish to develop is that ambiance proceeds by exerting an unobtrusive but lasting influence on anyone experiencing it. Far from being peremptory or injunctive, it operates through influence, as described by François Jullien: “So it is not direct, but discreet: one cannot confront it, because it is ambient [...] Its prime characteristic is its ability to infiltrate, insinuate and penetrate from all sides without warning, and consequently without our being able to notice it.” (2012: 100-101).

Asking what an ambiance allows us to be, do, perceive, share and experience *in situ* thus requires us to rethink our categories of understanding. Are the notions of form and object, representation and identity the most suitable for giving an account of urban atmospheres? This seems most unlikely, the aim being to give voice to what is pervasive, vibratory and transitory. In this respect sound is a valuable companion for exploring this route, helping us to shake off our habits of thought. What happens if we conceptualize the influence of an ambiance through sounds, in sonic terms? What can we learn in this respect from certain musical creations and other sonic experiments? Ultimately is it not a case of describing what is involved in an art of impregnation?

From immersion to impregnation

We should certainly start by acknowledging the power of the sonic world, as pointed out by Walter J. Ong (1981: 112): “Sound signals the present use of power, since sound

must be in active production to exist at all.” From the most remote mythology to contemporary experiments there are numerous accounts of the power of sound. Think for instance of the spell worked by the song of the Sirens in the Odyssey, of noise which subjugates or music which enchants, of the sound environments designed to encourage consumption or to distract us, of the use of sound in medical treatment or warfare, of the capacity of sound to mark out a territory or bring a marching crowd into step. Sound displays a capacity to take possession of bodies and to acclimatize inhabited spaces. But although it is now accepted that sound plays a part in an immersive experience, we are still a long way from describing or explaining the processes at work in such sonic immersion. Work on this topic generally emphasizes the fact that sounds come from all sides, enveloping us, even passing through and penetrating us. But in what way do they transform us? In what manner are we inhabited by the sonic environments we experience?

To answer these questions I propose to explore impregnation, the discreet, pervasive and durable mode of action by which ambiance takes effect. As a preliminary approximation, impregnation refers to *modus operandi* by which an ambiance accomplishes its immersive power. Ambient music is a perfect example of a sensory medium’s capacity for affecting us almost imperceptibly and leaving its mark on our ways of being *in situ*. If we accept that any place is qualified by an affective tonality, prevailed over by an ambiance, then impregnation is the formula for such prevalence. So our task is to describe how an atmosphere infuses a sense of place and leaves marks in the inhabitant experience.

This is no easy matter because impregnation operates through a fragile relation with the ambient world, a thing of nuances, gradations and restraint. It is a question of *je-ne-sais-quoi* and *presque-rien* (Jankélévitch 1980), hard to put into words and clearly enunciate. A whole lexicon could be compiled in an effort to express this tenuous, yet vital relation with the

ambient milieu: from floating to touching lightly, exhaling to inclination, incitation to infiltration, allusion to evocation. Much as when a novel carries us away to another world on a stream of words, or when music gently picks us up with its rhythm. For a moment we are living in the novel, we belong to the music. Here it is all a matter of “tiny bonds” (Laplantine 2003). Clearly, impregnation is not a matter of immediate, manifest efficacy; rather it plays on our porosity to the ambient environment, our ability to enter into resonance with a sensory space.

But in that case how does sounding art help us to pay attention to a sensory atmosphere’s tiny attachments and incitements? Of course, we can also focus on a city’s most remarkable and spectacular sonic events, such as street parties and collective entertainment of all sorts. However we are more interested here in the infra-ordinary (Perec 1989), in the evidence of the already-there and the ever-present, in recognizing the efficacy of a background sound, the existence of an acoustic backdrop which accompanies us in our everyday dealings, without us necessarily paying much attention. In fact our concern here is to address the “noise of existences” (Sansot 1976). Murray Schafer quite rightly identified this sonic domain made up of the thousand and one small noises of everyday life, too ordinary really to be noticed: the hum of air-conditioning, scraping of doors, pitter-patter of steps and whispering voices, the whish of human gestures and technical devices, all sorts of rubbing and brushing. In proposing the notion of keynote sounds he emphasized their subconscious, but no less pregnant character: “even though keynote sounds may not always be heard consciously, the fact that they are ubiquitously there suggests the possibility of a deep and pervasive influence on our behaviour and moods” (Schafer 1977: 9). In focusing on the sonic impregnation of our living

environment, my aim is to take Schafer's initial proposition a bit further and put it to the test by trying to tease out its possible consequences.

Testing impregnation against music

The world of music offers valuable clues to progress with investigation of the imperceptible efficacy of urban ambiances. Several contemporary philosophers have gone out of their way to show how music deploys unsuspected powers. Whether it is a matter of "giving ear to the unheard," as Michel Serres (1972) puts it, or "rendering audible forces [which are] inaudible in themselves" as Gilles Deleuze (2003) stated, it does seem that music has the power to give us access to almost imperceptible phenomena. Serres cites the music of Iannis Xenakis – in particular *Pithoprakta* (1956) – to show how it succeeds in making the acoustic background of the universe audible. An operation of substitution is at work here by which "the continuum of the course replaces the momentary discontinuum of the note" and "background without form replaces form without background." (Serres *op. cit.*: 187). What the music enables us to hear are the conditions under which the world is audible. For his part, Deleuze emphasizes the emergence of a beatless tempo, released from the constraints of measure. Although this idea slightly differs from what Serres suggests, substitution is nevertheless at work here too, giving preference to "sonic molecules rather than pure notes or tones." Here again the question of form becomes secondary, because the "pair constituted by material and forces supplants matter and form."

(Deleuze *op. cit.*: 145). So this time imperceptible forces are discovered and brought to the fore. In both cases music makes audible what cannot be heard without it.

Lending an ear to a background and to forces at least as much as to form, these ways of listening to the ambient world undoubtedly bring us closer to the work of impregnation. These two concepts – background and force – are essential to any attempt to conceptualize the efficacy of ambiance. On the one hand the sonic ambiance is not so much a set of sounds which can easily be discretized, listed and identified, rather an immediately experienced overall tonality (Thibaud 2011a). In short any ambiance proceeds from a qualified sensory background, the content of which we need to gauge, particularly in an urban environment. On the other hand, the sonic ambiance has the capacity to affect us and presents itself as a domain of an intensive order. If the ambiance has an influence it is precisely because it exerts forces on anyone experiencing it, in this case city-dwellers. By highlighting the nature of these backgrounds and forces, the notion of impregnation will really begin to make sense. So what can be said of sonic impregnation in/of an urban environment?

Ambiance as tonalization

We should start by saying that sound enables us to draw attention to the fundamental experience of resonance. Not only does it mark the sonority of a place, but it is the basis for our ability to reverberate with and be affected by the ambient world (Nancy 2007). We should therefore accept that we are not outside of, or indifferent to our surroundings, rather that we resonate with, in and through them. Resonance is not a simple acoustic phenomenon but more fundamentally refers to our ability to vibrate in unison with the world (Minkowski 1999). It indicates the entanglement of world and body and emphasizes our power of attunement.

A brief detour via the music of Claude Debussy may help us to clarify this difficult point. His work may be seen as the starting point for an aesthetics of sonority (Guigue 2009), breaking free from formal continuity and melody by creating chords for their timbral effect, with compound resonances, and focusing on pure instants of becoming. He thus enabled us to hear overall sonic states endowed with a particular atmosphere. We are dealing with blocks of sensation, which evoke rather than narrate, suggest rather than recite, impress rather than represent. Jankélévitch puts it beautifully: “Music does not express [an idea] word for word, nor does it signify point by point, but on the whole suggests; it does not lend itself to juxtalinear translations nor to confiding indiscreetly intimate details, but rather to atmospheric, pneumatic evocations” (1983: 69). Debussy uses all his timbral harmony to find sonic colors. But what interests us here is that his work may serve as a key for understanding impregnation.

Gaston Bachelard, who proposed the notion of tonalization, used the metaphor of the Aeolian harp, drawing much of his inspiration from Debussy to show how we enter into sympathy with our ambient milieu (Bachelard 1957). Debussy’s evocation of the sea, in *La Mer*, is so successful, not because it imitates as closely as possible the real noises of the sea and waves, but because it enables us to hear the motor premises, the climatic forces and the qualities of the flux driving an atmospheric experience of this sort. Marie-Pierre Lassus sums this up very well in her book on Bachelard and music: “Music does not imitate the sound of wind or water but prompts a form of bodily empathy which makes us sketch out in our minds movements which stir reminiscences linked to our singular experience of the landscape” (2010: 55). With Debussy and Bachelard we can understand how sonic moments spark our motor imagination, trigger qualities of motion and initiate “vitality

affects” (Stern 2010). If impregnation is at work here, it is through tonalization, reverberating with the vibrations in the ambient world.

Pinpointing the tonalization phenomenon enables us to distinguish between environment and ambiance. One way of putting it would be to say that an ambiance is what gives life to an environment, confers its emotional value and appeal. Any lived space is marked by this pathic relation which we entertain with the world around us. In urban terms, ambiance operates by setting the tone of territories, endowing them with both an affective tonality and a particular overall physiognomy. As a result a single adjective is sufficient, enabling us to qualify an urban situation as joyful, gloomy, electric, friendly, peaceful or stressful. In this respect Jean Ladrière sees the city as an “existential inductor, in so far as we can recognize in it, through resonance, a certain affective tonality which qualifies our existential movement” (1973: 155). Clearly the idea of tonalization is heavy with consequence; it is in this way that existential territories settle in. Sound is of prime importance in this process, if one considers that setting the tone is much the same as making a voice heard which ushers in an atmosphere and invokes a quality of situation, expresses an affective disposition and makes a mood audible. There is no question here of imposing the reign of a dominant tonality which would mark the urban world as a whole, but rather of asking how the sensory fashions territory and querying the tonalizing powers of inhabited spaces. Whereas modernist metropolises were marked by hyperstimulation (Simmel 1976) and shock aesthetics (Benjamin 2006), contemporary Western mega-cities tend to be described in terms of detachment from reality, leading to an uncanny feeling (Vidler 1994), an almost hallucinatory experience (Bégout 2002), anaesthetized perceptions (Ingersoll 2006) or a preponderance of feeble sensations (Koolhaas 1995).

Ambiance as atmospherization

A second way of questioning the powers of ambiance is to experiment with the thresholds of perception. Many musicians and sound artists focus on these tiny perceptions, which are so infinitesimal and mixed up with one another that we do not usually perceive them distinctly. Leibniz liked to take as an example the roar of the sea made up of the sound of an infinite number of barely audible ripples, which we would have difficulty picking out but which nevertheless affect us. “We must be affected slightly by the motion of this wave, and have some perception of each of these noises, however faint they may be; otherwise there would be no perception of a hundred thousand waves, since a hundred thousand nothings cannot make something” (1996 [1704]: 55). He makes clear that not being fully aware of these tiny perceptions does not prevent us from being affected. From this point of view, impregnation is not a question of manifest phenomena but rather a low-intensity influence which infiltrates itself on all sides and takes hold over time. What is difficult is to give meaning and existence to this slight register of sensory experience, which Marcel Duchamp referred to as the “infra-mince” (infra-thin). It is very much as if this order of reality is too minimal to be noticed, too evanescent to grasp, too insignificant to be worth of attention. Yet these tiny fluctuations in perception weave the fabric of our familiarity with the ambient backdrop, which modulates our state of being and our background feelings (Damasio 2003).

Here again we may be guided by sound. The 20th century witnessed a steady drive towards the “molecularization of musical material” (Critton 2011), working on threshold effects and micro-variations, liminal phenomena and micro-intervals. Concepts such as spectral music, granular synthesis, musical continuum and micro-tonality spring to mind. All of these heighten our ability to sense tiny variations in sonic matter and explore the fringes of sensory experience. Their aim is to make us hear the way one shifts

imperceptibly from one state to another. In this respect Pierre Boulez (1963) draws a distinction between the smooth space which “occupies without counting,” a fluid, moving space populated by forces and directions, and the striated space which “counts in order to occupy,” a metric, hierarchical space made up of shapes and dimensions. Using music to reveal this smooth space opens the way for the conception of an intensive space which really gives full scope to affects (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). In this case impregnation proceeds imperceptibly and continuously, below a level which we are capable of representing to ourselves, thanks to non-polarized affects and confused sonic impressions, and in constant motion. It certainly seems appropriate to refer to this as “atmospherization” in so far as the affective investment does not apply to a specific object but to an environment as a whole (Tellenbach 1983).

One important consequence this involves is to emphasize the importance of continuous flows rather than discreet signs in establishing a space’s ambiance. This is how it is possible to distinguish between context and atmosphere. As Fernando Gil notes: “The former [context] is visible and can be reduced to a set of relations and signs. It is semiotizable, whereas the atmosphere is infra-semiotic, unfolding in a continuum” (2000: 16). So an urban ambiance proceeds in a pervasive manner, without it being possible to pick out a single, specific origin for the affects deployed. Should one nevertheless hazard a guess at the factors triggering an affective tonality, it is only possible to draw up a partial, necessarily incomplete list. For example, as Annie Honnorat and Pierre Sansot explain, a happy street is due to “the welcoming attitude of the people you meet, their accents, the cut of their

features, surprising colours which never shock the eye, nimble gestures, shop displays, helpful staff, graceful buildings and the clarity of the overall design” (1998: 130). This list could go on forever, not only because allowance must be made for other components (the weather, the pace of movement, etc.), but above all because this process of atmospherization is fundamentally pervasive, continuous and infra-semiotic.

This does not mean that ambiances are all similar and have the same intensive strength. As Gilles Deleuze (1988) emphasized, small perceptions are not about the relationship between the parts and the whole but between the ordinary and the noticeable. That's really what urban ambiances are all about, in other words, their respective degree of salience and consistency. Some sound atmospheres seize us more than others, some are more sensitive to the expressive power of inhabitants (Thibaud 2011b). If any sonic ambiance convenes a set of microperceptions that set their mark on the places and “atmospherize” them, each demonstrate a specific capacity to affect city dwellers and be affected by them. Hence, impregnation is not only a matter of the nature of affective tonalities but also of their force and intensity. In other words, ambiances are distinguishable according to their respective power of impregnation.

Ambiance as climatization

A third approach to questioning the impregnation of an ambiance starts with the observation that music has become omnipresent in daily life, in retail spaces and transport facilities, in leisure centres and workplaces. It can hardly be a coincidence that two authors (Toop 1995; Prendergast 2001) should have coined the term “ambient music” to qualify the 20th century, on account of its enveloping, ubiquitous character. This calls to mind the work of both Muzak and Brian Eno, on account of their ability to create particularly

immersive sound environments. There is no shortage of terms referring to these types of music, in which we are constantly immersed and which, most of the time, we blank out from our awareness, terms such as functional music, elevator music, furniture music, background music or easy-listening music. Regardless how diverse their aesthetics and finalities, their common purpose is to broadcast music in selected urban environments, and to compose it for specific times, activities and places. Ambient music starts from the idea that it is possible to use music to instil a particular atmosphere and to modulate the mood of the target audience almost subliminally. It would certainly be misleading to lump together all forms of music under this heading. Eno himself makes this point, distinguishing his work from Muzak's, even if there is common ground between the two.

Whereas Muzak "is meant to be heard, but not listened to," Eno's music tries to lend itself to various types of listening. As he explains in the liner notes on *Music for Airports Ambient 1* (1978), "Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening-attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting."

Over and above these differences ambient music leads us to the question of lack of attention which is central to the sonic experience. This means that the efficacy of a musically instilled ambiance does not necessarily depend on focused or attentive listening. Indeed it might be quite the contrary: listening in a drifting, peripheral, distracted or unfocused way affects us just as much, and more durably and subconsciously. Muzak makes no bones about this, offering to orchestrate and modulate the public's affects by operating below the level of its awareness (Sumrell and Varnelis 2005). Our capacity to be affected also operates without us being vaguely aware of it or expressing any intention, as is

the case in daily life governed by heedlessness and what Benjamin (1983) refers to as perception “through habit.”

The increasing musicalisation of the urban environment often goes hand-in-hand with other systems such as air-conditioning and artificial lighting. In every case the aim is to create artificial sensory environments and to climatize living milieus. Here ambiance is a matter of climatization, defined as “the daily operation of artificial, yet invisible conditioning by which humans create their own ambiance for living, forming relatively closed, protected spaces encased in tradition and social life, where they can breathe the healthy, innocent air of familiarity” (Bégout 2005: 260). The sonic ecology of urban spaces is thus increasingly the focus of intervention and design. Peter Sloterdijk (2005) has probably taken analysis of this process of climatizing our living spaces further than anyone else. In his Spheres trilogy he shows that human existence only really makes sense when seen in the context of the atmospheres which make it possible. We live our lives in spheres, moving from one sensory envelope to another, developing climatic installations to suit our needs. Until now this climatic condition for our existence was largely implicit, but it is now becoming explicit. As Dominic Desroches (2010) explains, summing up Sloterdijk’s position, humans are becoming “designers of atmospheres.” Sound plays an important part in this process, as the means by which a group is brought into step, bonds internally and is impregnated by ambiance: “The first human island is covered by a psycho-acoustic bell-jar, like some shopping mall with Christmas music. It constitutes its sonospheric cohesion through the undulating presence of voices and noises with which the group impregnates itself as a proprioceptive entity.” (Sloterdijk 2005: 334).

Two further aspects of the efficiency of an ambiance are revealed from climatization. On the one hand, ambiance is more effective and assertive when it involves long periods of exposure that eventually form into habits. A lived everyday sound environment generates percepts and forms ways of hearing that fully participate in a social form of life. In other words, impregnation is a phenomenon that persists and endures over time by gradually becoming naturalized. On the other hand, climatization can be interpreted in terms of “encapsulation” (de Caeter 2004) insofar as the creation of artificial environments tends to produce standardization, privatization and asceptization of urban spaces. This more critical version of climatization reminds us that sonic design is eminently political and engages urban issues of the utmost importance: tendency to evacuate urbanness and to neutralize the public character of urban space, impoverishment and normalization of sensory experience, manipulation of attention for commercial purposes, etc. It is the whole issue of ambient sound as a common good which is at stake here.

Conclusion

Approaching urban ambiances through sound opens a new perspective about *in situ* experience. The question is not only to recognize the immersive power of sound but also to emphasize its ability to permeate experience and to affect lives. The sonic experience of an ambiance does not uniquely involve focused and conscious perception but also global and diffuse sensations more difficult to grasp. An art of impregnation is at stake, which relies on the resources of sound and music to understand the atmospheric existence of the urban world. In this regard, three joint movements have been described: *tonalization* qualifies urban areas in terms of affective tonalities and activates the ability of the body to resonate to the vibrations of the surrounding world; *atmosphérisation* transforms urban spaces into intensive milieus and pervades experience with small perceptions; *climatization* converts urban spaces into conditioned environments and frames the social forms of

sensitivity. This perspective makes it possible to introduce background and low intensity phenomena into sensory experience of urban life. An art of impregnation makes sense through sound, making urban atmospheres a fragile and nuanced area of experience, and attentive to the discrete efficiency of ambient phenomena.

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