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The sonic attunement of social life

Jean-Paul Thibaud

We are discovering that the world resounds. A wide variety of approaches have emerged taking an interest in the sonority of inhabited space, with talk of soundscapes, field recordings, sound studies, sound art, acoustemology, sound installation, auditory culture and even acoustic ecology. A whole field of research and practice is springing up – with its own publications, experiments, creative endeavours and journals – a field which sets out to lend an ear to everyday situations and learn to listen to our ways of being together. We could no doubt demonstrate that such attention is not new and that, on the contrary, it is underpinned by a long, underground history. But a genuine sensibility in tune with the audible world is nevertheless emerging, changing the sensory relationship we entertain with our everyday surroundings.

So, what can anthropology contribute these efforts to listen to the world? In raising this question our purpose is not to constrain a disciplinary posture, all the more so as the approaches involved already tend to complement and feed on one another, producing countless hybrid offshoots. Furthermore the world of human and social sciences increasingly enters into resonance with the art world to contribute to a socio-aesthetic of the sonic world which is still in its very early days. On the contrary, our aim is to highlight a new line of research suggested by this collection of contributions: ambient sound. We should explain straight away that few of the articles make this concept their main theme, nor does it necessarily play a leading role in them. Rather it is present as a sort of watermark, disseminated in the descriptions and analyses, as if it were only nascent and barely sketched out. But it is no coincidence that this term features in the title of the publication. It invites the reader to listen to the ambient world which cannot be reduced simply to the environment and landscape. What more is there to be said? How are we to specify, take stock of and accept the consequences of ambient sound?

As an introduction we may attempt to distinguish ambient sound from soundscape and auditory environment. All three terms are close, referring to a sonic experience, and are sometimes associated, indeed confused; they nevertheless correspond to different ways of listening to the world. In “soundscape”, a term coined by R. Murray Schafer (1977), the idea of the composition of the sonic environment is uppermost, with the possibility of an aesthetic way of listening to the everyday world, which in turn entails the figure-ground relationship inherited from the visual landscape and rooted in a distinction between low and hi-fidelity landscape. Which brings us close to a contemplative form of listening close to the experience of a viewer looking at a painting. In other words, the soundscape is based on a process of assessing and selecting which involves extracting from the sonic environment what is perceived as an aesthetic unity. With “auditory environment”, it is more a case of immersion, than a frontal relationship or a listening-to-music posture. This is emphasized by the word “environment”, sound being a part of our surroundings, or our *in situ* experience. A wide range of work could stake a claim to an ambition of this sort, focusing attention on even the most ordinary situations and attempting to describe the sonic environments of daily life. Though the concept of ‘ambient sound’ shares this aim, it seems to attach just as much importance to sonic actions as their perceptual counterparts, to the social modalities of producing the sonic environment as to those of its reception. In other words, and we may take this as our starting point, ambient sound above all concerns the pervasive noises of living in society and forms of social and emotional life in so far as they may be heard and make themselves audible to others.

Sound in common

The sonic world is basically of an event-related order; it is indissociable from what is going on. Many authors have highlighted this characteristic, emphasizing the capacity of sounds to tell us about what things and living beings are doing (Arnheim, 1936), about the event-related nature of sound (Casati and Dokic, 1994), and the primacy of the verbal field over the substantive with regard to sonic material (Flusser, 2005). In short sound is the effect of an activity. As Walter Ong sums it up (1967, p. 112): “sound must be in

active production in order to exist at all". These sonic productions are varied and diverse, relating to both the manifestation of natural phenomena, the use of technical tools, the operation of technological artefacts, and the expression of the body in action (voices and all sorts of gestures).

We are thus immersed in a world of sound in which we take part and which everyone contributes to producing through their daily activities and actions. In this respect some sonic productions constitute genuine acts of presence in the urban space. Whether this means the festive use of firecrackers in Naples (See Féraud) or heckling voices in India (See Guillebaud), the aim is very certainly to make oneself heard and to mark space with one's presence. But although these phenomena are the result of deliberate, intentional sonic actions, targeting others, they enable us more generally to demonstrate the presential power of sound, its ability to embody the immediacy of existences. With sound, "it is easier for me to slip from the domain of representation to that of presence" (Sansot, 1976, p. 21). Oral poetry admirably illustrates this point (See Depaule), putting the accent in particular on the expressiveness of the voice, the potential of a cry or a breath, and the all-out exploration of sonic bodies.

But we also need to acknowledge the collective force of sound, its capacity for making the work of multiple beings audible (Serres, 1995), grouping together (Quignard, 1996), addressing a limitless number of individuals (Simmel, 1981). This anthropology of ambient sound is therefore, through and through, a social and cultural anthropology constantly questioning the nature of life in sonic terms. There are many and various inputs to such a field of questioning, focusing on the make-up of an acoustic community or the audible forms of public sociability, the cultural filters affecting perception or the social representations of the sonic world. In short the question is to know how the sonic makes society and territory. Sound is consequently to be considered not so much as an object of social anthropology among others, rather as an operator and a condition for the possibility of social life itself. A consequence of prime epistemological importance deserves mention here. If the sonic world is a constitutive part of being together, if the sonic and social worlds are co-extensive, then sound must be studied as one of the immanent modalities of the social bond (Augoyard, 2003).

But the attention given to the audible forms of social life also necessitates the careful articulation of sonic perceptions and productions to the contexts and frameworks into which they fit. The public – even political – nature of the sonic worlds studied here depends upon it. Every sound is embedded in a set of codes, norms, practices, gestures, know-how, customs, rituals and interpretative schemes which must be brought to light with precision. It was certainly not by chance that Ludwig Wittgenstein used a sound-based metaphor to explain the following point. “How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by sketching the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what one man is doing now, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action” (Wittgenstein, 1981, n°567). So when we set about listening to sonic environments we must not only take account of the sounds themselves but also the background and the conditions which make them possible.

The audible field

Any work on an anthropology of ambient sound also entails exploring the audible field. Each time we move between highly contrasted sonic cultures – from southern Italy to Ethiopia, from India to Scotland, Japan to Spain, Egypt to Portugal or France – we discover new ambient sonorities, new ways of listening to the world. There is certainly no cause to take this reasoning too far: our purpose is simply to note the huge diversity of situations at stake. This exploration of sonic worlds is based on the study of fields on a wide range of scales, each time raising specific questions and bringing into play investigative methods that are also very diverse. Thick ethnographic description, interpretation of old written texts, in situ sound recordings, sound preference tests, personal narratives, audio-ethnography and artistic performances can be found in this volume. The anthropology of ambient sound relies on numerous scientific disciplines and takes advantage of the heuristic power of pluridisciplinarity. Though the aim is definitely to come as close as possible to the experience of residents and local people, in every case to immerse oneself in a new ambient environment, the aim is also to acknowledge the plural modes

in which sound exists. We should point out that much of the work presented here displays a genuine concern for methodological invention, seeking out original tools for investigation and analysis. For example, listening or sound recording is experimented while walking; new technological tools are developed to record or to listen in a new way; various types of audio, written and visual data are closely intertwined to document the complexity of a territory; auto-ethnography is incorporated in the data and the narratives. Methods are not given once and for all but on the contrary always a challenge to meet.

Without claiming in any way that this work is exhaustive, several strands run through this research, opening up the audible field. The first strand concerns sonic productions at the two extremities of what is acoustically audible. Interest focuses on sonic sources that are particularly powerful – the noise of fireworks (See Féraud) or other saturated sounds (See Guillebaud, Battesti,) – or, on the contrary, barely perceptible – footsteps on the grounds and other murmurs (See Rioux, Guiu). In particular it seems necessary to rehabilitate the category of noise, all too often disparaged in work on sound. The theme of sonic comfort sometimes favours the existence of measured sounds, balanced sonic environments, but this anthropology of ambient sound reveals all there is to be gained from listening to noise and silence, ranging from the deafening to the almost imperceptible, from the hullabaloo associated with times of collective exuberance to the infinitesimal whispers by which we may hear the “wings of silence” (*coulisses du silence*) (Jankélévitch, 1978).

Another strand invites us to rediscover sounds that are ordinary, habitual, non-descript, often going unnoticed because they are so integrated in daily life and blanked out by conscious perception (See Rioux, Uimonen, Depaule). Verging on the obvious, often taken for granted, these everyday sounds are fully entitled to a place in the sonic ambiance – indeed its existence may depend on them – and play a part in the relation of familiarity we entertain with our immediate environment. So it is a matter of describing as closely as possible what an ordinary sonic ambiance may be and of what it consists. Here we are very probably near to the ethnomethodology which thematizes the ordinary character of social life and makes it a field of investigation in its own right (Sacks, 1992). We are dealing with the sounds which feed an ambiance, which give it

consistency and depth, and which may be heard without necessarily being noticed.

A third category of sounds emerges from this anthropology of ambient sound: those loaded with exceptional symbolic value and a particularly intense emotional charge. These sonic productions are close to the margins of what it is socially acceptable to hear. This means paying attention to sounds thought to be intolerable, associated with what one might hear in heaven or hell (See Damon-Guillot), or even obscene such as bodily or intimate noises (See Chandola). Behind all these cases lurks a sonic environment which is supposed to be concealed or neutralized, as if it took us beyond the limits of what is bearable or seemly. Clearly, the sonic world is far from being neutral or free from affects and taboos. Rejoining some of the concerns of Georges Bataille's Collège de Sociologie, such work seeks to focus debate on the meeting point between the sacred and the poetic, between politics and intimacy. It opens the door to anything related to taboos and transgression, and in so doing raises questions about what belongs in the public domain.

In their respective ways, these strands run along the borders of the sonic domain, defining its perimeter and frontiers, while at the same time opening up the full dimensions and potential of the audible field. In a way, the idea is to work on the thresholds of the sonic world, be they acoustic (ranging from the very noisy to the barely perceptible), attentional (from focus to lack of attention), or social (from the public to the personal). But also these sonic productions and listening modes only really make sense and become relevant when related to specific forms of life, concrete situations and clearly defined space-time frameworks. In other words cultures are conceptualized here as the dynamics of sonic sensitivity, as sensory-socialization processes.

The powers of sound

The anthropology of ambient sound also enables us to recognize and study the varying power exerted by sound. The sonic world really has the power to control, take hold and possess us, inevitably bringing into play forces and dynamics which affect us (Zukerkandl, 1956). This is very apparent in the German language, which establishes a direct link between *hören* (to hear) and

gehorschen (to obey). Moreover numerous examples remind us of the close affinity between sound and power, from the Sirens' song no one can resist (Homer) to the radio as an instrument for manipulating the people (Chakhotin). It is well known that "*l'oreille n'a pas de paupière*" [there is no closing one's ears] leaving us totally at the mercy of sounds. This is certainly the point made by Erwin Straus (1966), who emphasizes the presential character of sound and for whom 'all hearing is presentic'. "Tone has an activity all its own; it presses in on us, surrounds, seizes and embraces us. Only in a latter phase we are able to defend ourselves against sound, only after sound has already take possession of us, while in the visual sphere we begin to take flight before we have been prehended. The acoustical pursues us, we are at its mercy, unable to get away" (p. 16).

The power of sound reaches out in many directions, affecting our behaviour and our surroundings, emotions and moods. This is true of the performative power of sound, the way it inflects gesture and action, imposing order on practices. Sound becomes a management tool, a means of capturing and disciplining attention, an instrument for rationalizing conduct and shaping routines. The example of electric bells in Japanese railway stations is a case in point (See Manea), much as drivers hooting their horns in Cairo to put pressure on police on point duty (See Battesti), vocal techniques of bus ticket sellers in India to get the clients' attention in order to be most efficient (See Guillebaud), the creation of a new sonic milieu to enforce a process of urban revitalization (See Sánchez), or the use of powerful sounds by missionaries to convert people (See Damon-Guillot). Sound is not an epiphenomenon of practical action, it is an integral part of it playing an active role. We should perhaps insist on the very special bond between time and sound: the time it takes for a sound to unfold and the time its listening lasts are co-extensive. In other words, the sound "dictates the temporality of its perception" (Sève, 2002) and thus has the power to impose rhythm and duration on the course of actions. It also brings into play an ability to adjust and modulate the sequence of events. At issue here is the practical efficacy of sounds, making the sonic world a place of affordances, events, shifters and improvisations which all play their part in our carrying out our business.

But it is equally essential to register the formidable emotional power of sound. The various studies presented here make this clear, showing that the sonic world cannot be reduced to simply a functional, exclusively rational place. For example, the aim of some railway bells and whistles may be to control flows and make getting on or off easier, but they also set the tone for arrivals and departures, contributing to a sense of collective hysteria or enchantment, as the case may be (See Manea). But we could also cite – with very different degrees of intensity – certain utterances by Indian women in the slums they inhabit (See Chandola), the festive charge which is an essential component of the noisy celebrations in Naples (See Féraud), or indeed the various affective tonalities to be heard in Barcelona neighbourhoods (See Guiu). Sound is definitely a powerful medium on the basis of which affects and sensory atmospheres may be deployed, a modality particularly propitious to expressing the pathic component of sensory experience. It is here that emerges a particularly fecund meeting point between the sonic and ambient worlds. It really makes sense to talk about an ambient sound, the sound being a basic characteristic of how an ambiance is expressed (Thibaud, 2011).

Sound's potential is also deployed in spatial terms. Sound is not only inscribed in a space – as the propagation of a physical signal in an environment – but also as a force for territorialisation (See Guiu) or cultural identity (See Uimonen). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980) demonstrated this feature with their *ritornello* concept: it is the mark which makes the territory. Sound may tend to be impossible to delimit, slipping through all sorts of envelopes, but it nevertheless plays a part in territorial configuration: when certain sounds are identified with particular spaces, when certain sonic actions are only possible in specific places, when the forms of reverberation and other acoustic qualities constitute the signature of such and such an environment ... These are all ways of affirming the capacity of sound to turn a space into a territory. Two points need to be made in this respect. Firstly, sound can become an instrument of domination: taking possession of a territory by sound is also a way of asserting one's power over its inhabitants or controlling the experience of public spaces (See Sánchez). Secondly, sound is also related to a process of de-territorialization: it tends to leak out of a territory, emancipating itself and

opening up to other connections such as religion (See Damon-Guillot) or poetry (See Depaule). So the powers of sound are open, cannot be circumscribed and lend themselves to other lines of flight.

Listening to ambiances

By listening to social life we may in fact unveil a whole sensory atmosphere, just waiting to be heard, with its rhythms and intensities, vibrations and pulsations, resonance and discordance. The aim is not so much to categorize attitudes or represent phenomena as to describe atmospheres and allow sensations to emerge. A modal anthropology attentive to the ways of being of the sonic world needs to be further developed (Laplantine, 2005). Sound sets the tone for situations and territories, without contenting itself with focused listening. One of the lessons that could be drawn from these essays on sonic anthropology is that they are moving towards a posture which accords great importance to borderline sonorities, floating styles of listening and peripheral perceptions. If the aim is to develop our faculty for listening to ambient sonorities the price to pay is a great deal work on de-focusing. What are therefore at stake are the fringes and margins of the sonic world, and what lends it consistency. Could the anthropology of ambient sound simply be another means of listening to ambiances?

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