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Pulse. Dwelling in Sound

Jean-Paul Thibaud

What happens when we question contemporary cities, everyday spaces and situated experiences with sound, according to and from a sonic perspective? Our bearings and our models of intelligibility are no longer exactly the same. Porosity tends to replace limits, soft envelopes take precedence over strict lines, rhythms and tones regain importance compared to face-to-face and distancing. Assuredly, resonance is a key feature of sonic experience. Hence, Sam Auinger and Dietmar Offenhuber perfectly demonstrate how “*the plaza is a place of resonance*”, giving voice to a great diversity of social activities as well as various soundful infrastructures of transportation. From this perspective, the plaza – for instance Alexanderplatz in Berlin – is a perfect place to listen to the complexity, the richness and the dynamic of a social form of life. In a way resonance blurs the separation between the subject and its immediate surroundings since “*resonance is both the resonance of a sonic body for its own sake and the resonance of the sound in a listening body, which resonates itself as it listens.*”¹ With sound, we are not only immersed in a space. We are permeated by a medium, both inside and out, imbued with the current situation and penetrated with its atmospheric content. Therefore our ways of thinking habitation are bound to move and to transform. Our very idea of dwelling has to be reconsidered. We must then give voice to diffuse, vibratory, molecular and transitory phenomena. And still, it is our sensitivity itself that is put to the test. Are we not bound to become more attentive of ordinary and unnoticed ambiances? Are we not led to give special attention to the enigma of attunement? Do we not have to take seriously our capacity to be affected by our surroundings and to act upon it in return? Such questions emerge as one seeks to understand our sonic ways of dwelling in the world. In other words, sound has the ability to set the tone of lived spaces and to install common moods. One of the challenges is thus to describe how a space acquires an atmospheric charge and manages to resonate with a specific *Stimmung*. Perhaps this is one of the lessons that can be drawn from Andi Schoon's discussion of workspaces. As it is rightly noted, in a post-fordist area “work itself is diffused into the everyday”. Thus, a new field of research opens, questioning the way in which ambiances and affective atmospheres are embedded in the ongoing process of emergence of a control society. One can wonder then how sound embodies the diffuse quality and the affective tonality of a situation. Whether related to domestic spaces, urban squares, street life or workplaces, sound is closely intertwined with ordinary gestures, bodily affects, social interactions and background practices. It is always embedded in “*the whole hurly-burly of human actions*”². It can help to test our sense of home or to highlight the features of a public space, to reveal the affordances of a place or to explore the resources of a company. But then, new ways of listening have to be explored. For instance, one can rely on *sensobiographic walks* inspired by new materialism (Juhana Venäläinen, Sonja Pöllänen & Rajko Muršič) or on *resonance chambers* to think with our

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy *Listening*. translated by C. Mandell, New York, Fordham University Press, 2007, p. 77.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein *Zettel*. second edition, edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H.V. Wright. Oxford, Blackwell, 1981, n°567.

ears (Sam Auinger & Dietmar Offenhuber). One can mobilize a *tapestry of sonic ritual* to highlight a realistic home (Jacqueline Waldock) or *the spirit of a whole company* inspired by the *fabbrica diffusa* (Andi Schoon). These various approaches constitute original propositions that enable to explicit the role of sound in our habitual modes of dwelling. They help to better understand how sound adjusts to a place and configures it at the same time, accommodates to it while activating it, is both perceived and produced. In other words, sound is not only spatialized but also spatializing. But also, as proposed by Juhana Venäläinen, Sonja Pöllänen and Rajko Muršičnous, we must bear in mind that sound is not only a social feature of the lived world. It involves also fundamentally a material dimension. Analysing the streets of Turku and Ljubljana, they enable us “to make sense of the materialities of sound”. Beyond the extreme variety of contexts, conditions, and social forms of life, sound has the power to hold together the heterogeneous components of a situation. As Erwin Straus has perfectly shown, “*space filled with tone and homogenized by a single pervading movement – and in this the homogeneity of the acoustic mode of the space differs from that of empty metrical space – has itself a presentic character*”³. We are dealing here with the capacity of sound to give consistency to an overall situation, to unify in a single diffuse quality the numerous features of a situation. It is of course possible to discriminate and distinguish the sounds of an environment, to identify them one by one, to find out what each one of them relates to. No doubt sound involves a cognitive activity that makes it possible to face problems of a practical and functional nature. To live in a place, one must be able to identify the sounds that compose it and to act in accordance, to be able to orient oneself in the everyday sonic environment. But sound also has a power of “atmosphericization” and homogenization – a power of coalescence – which endows each situation with a singular pervasive quality⁴. When we enter a new space or when we discover a new city, we are immediately caught in its ambiance. We are not only led to perceive and interpret a sonic environment, but also to immediately feel and sense an atmosphere. A first overall impression emerges, which appeals to solicits the whole body and suggests qualities of movement. Before being oriented, our sense of hearing is floating, peripheral and defocused. Let us not forget that if an acoustic signal may transform into an information in referring to its source, it is first and foremost a medium, constitutive of an ambient milieu. The experience of sound consists as much in feeling a global tone of the place as hearing a set of clearly distinct sounds. It is not just about identifying the various sound signals, but also letting oneself traversed and transported by a whole acoustic environment. To dwell in sound requires as much to immerse oneself in the situation and to resonate with the surrounding environment, as to seek to understand and interpret what is going on. In addition to the power of atmosphericization of sound previously mentioned, we also have to consider its power of “tonalization”⁵. This means that sound is not reducible to its cognitive dimension. It opens up to the pathic and

³ Erwin Straus [1930] « The Forms of Spatiality » In *Phenomenological Psychology of Erwin Straus*. New York, Basic Books Inc., 1966, p. 35.

⁴ On the notion of diffuse quality, refer in particular to John Dewey [1934] *Art as Experience*. New York, Perigee Books, 1985. See also John Dewey « Qualitative Thought ». In *Philosophy and Civilization*, New York, Minton, Balch & Co, 1931, p. 93-116.

⁵ About the idea of “tonalization” and the image of the Eolian Harp, see Gaston Bachelard [1957] *The poetics of space*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1994.

affective feature of sensory experience. But if this is the case, it is because sound imposes on us and takes possession of us, overwhelms us, constantly insists and persists. No doubt that is why sound makes it possible to wonder what it means to feel at home. By asking this question, Jacqueline Waldock manages to give a very thorough account of what sound can teach us in this matter: "both nurturing and damaging experiences are a reality of home". And finally, regardless of the spaces considered and the activities at stake, we cannot help but to vibrate in unison with the world, to reverberate and to attune to the surroundings in which we are immersed. We are inevitably "ensounded"⁶.

⁶ Tim Ingold *Being alive. Essays on movement, knowledge and description*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011.