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Sensitive Topologies Configurations in the Milieu and the Urban Landscape

What You Feel Is What You Get

Mohammed BOUBEZARI¹

Abstract. Usually, in questions relating to the landscape, especially the urban one, three sensitive modalities are mobilised in the configurations specific to particular lived situations: the visible, the audible and the tangible. The tangible one is often assumed to be intrinsically linked to the visible modality by visuo-haptic coupling. However, on the basis of the study of concrete cases, and through the paradigm of sensitive topology, we have been given to note that the visible and the tangible are not always linked. Whether in domestic situations of inhabiting, or in public situations. The paradigm of sensitive topology phenomenologically deconstructs the notions of milieu and urban landscape by facilitating the analysis of lived situations.

Keywords. *Sensitive Topologies, Visuo-Haptic Coupling, Territoriality, Urban Design*

Is What You See That What You Touch?

The relationship between sound and space has been widely explored, as long as sound was supposed to obey the geometric rules of propagation in and between visible material bodies. Strange persistence of the visible in the sound spaces. The named object is trapped in its visible topology! Is it an “unjust” sovereignty of the visible on the sound like Jean-François Augoyard has rightly alerted (1991)? There is more sovereign and more rooted, the tangible. As we will see below, before being tangible, the material object is revealed by its visibility or its audibility.

So, to think about sound and space, do we first have to “turn off” the light?

Spatial Versus Local

Since the last 70's, the anthropological approach to sound space has opened two new research paths:

- The first is that of Murray Schaefer's “soundscape” (1977) where sound ecology found all its logic in scientific debate, opened up new artistic horizons and ended up seducing the world of acoustic engineering, especially since the Lisbon congress in 2007 (ICSV12, Lisbon, 2005) where M.Schafer had the opportunity to address an audience of engineers asking for new developments;
- The second is that of “inhabitant rhetoric” (Augoyard, 1979) rather phenomenological, it opened the way to long and laborious research on the sound dimension in the habitat system, also sound effects and the theory of ambiances which includes today all its sensitive dimensions and not exclusively sound.

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However, the understanding of the concept of landscape is different in these two main streams. For the first, the landscape is understood as a whole, global and encompassing all sound activity (Truax, 2000), aesthetically or culturally sanctioned as “good” or acceptable and where any parasite must be removed from this universal composition. For the second, the approach is phenomenological. The parasite (Augoyard, 1989) must be taken into account as part of the sound production. The soundscape is not this absolute frame of reference, it is only a perspective, a particular point of view on the same sound phenomenon. Pascal Amphoux shed some light on it, and made it operational (1997; 2000).

We will see below how the notion of sensitive topology makes it possible to articulate the environment and the landscape.

A second point that seems common in both approaches is the relationship to space and the signal. If acoustic engineering has made it its field of predilection, the anthropological approaches quoted above allowed an interesting development beyond the traditional disciplinary borders but the spatiality of the sound phenomena was somewhat neglected or at least a return to the problem of its spatiality did not take place. Sound is often considered, despite space, to be qualified time. Moreover, the attempts at sound mapping have not considered the articulation of sound and its perception down to the detail of its spatiality. The quantitative maps have remained topographically more precise than the qualitative ones. These qualitative maps simply give to listen rather than see. The geolocation of sounds replaces their actual spatialization. This challenge motivated our research on the sound topology represented with its spatial limits (Fig.1).

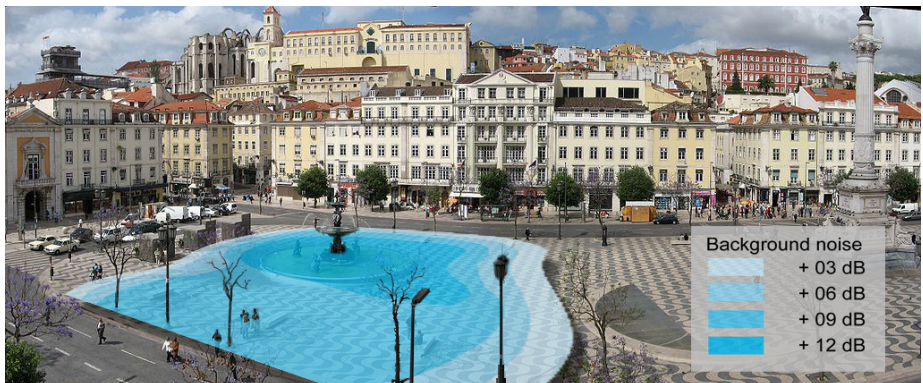


Figure 1. Water sound topology in Rossio square, M. Boubezari, 2012. In what and how can the notion of sensitive topology account for an experienced and perceived phenomenon?

For this, it is necessary to review some cliché concerning the audible, the visible and the tangible and the most common sensitive couplings, because, in questions relating to the landscape, especially the urban one, these three sensitive modalities are mobilized in the configurations specific to particular lived situations. The tangible one is often assumed to be intrinsically linked to the visible modality by visuo-haptic coupling.

Object Versus Body

Although topology was developed especially in mathematics by Henri Poincaré, with the rigor and the necessary precision that this discipline imposes, the fact is that remains initially an intuitive visual representation of envelope beyond from which an object defines its limits in space. So, what do Husserl and Merleau-Ponty tell us about the sensitive experience of this topology?

For Husserl, explains Françoise Dasture (1988), visual perception is distal in the sense that we perceive here this visible limit which is “there.” The signal being the necessary medium which conveys this information to the perceiving subject. This understanding is valid for both a light and a sound signal. For Merleau-Ponty, perception occurs at the level of contact with the body involved in the perceptual experience. The object is also visible “here” just as the body of the perceiving subject is visible “there.” But the main difference between these two understandings is that the signal for the Merleau-Ponty is not a stimulus but it is an integral part of the perceived object. Besides, with this author it is more a question of body rather than of an object.

This subtle difference between these two approaches challenges us on the limit of the perceived thing, object in the first but body in the second. The object emitting a signifying signal while the body already has this signal which gives it meaning and names it.

The immediate consequence, as much philosophical as practical of this comparison is decisive as regards the delimitation of the limit of what is perceived. This envelope which is the sensitive topology which interests us is in the first case, that of the physical body, which in the reality of experience is none other than its tangible limit, and in the second case this envelope is limited only by other surrounding bodies. In this regard Merleau-Ponty writes “Experience reveals under objective space, in which the body ultimately takes place, a primordial spatiality, the first of which is only the envelope and which merges with the very being of the body. To be a body is to be tied to a certain world, we have seen, and our body is not primarily in space, it is space “(1945). What Juhany Pallasma expressed more simply later (2005).

The research we have conducted on sound topology (Boubezari, 2011) has confirmed the Merleau-Ponty approach because when it comes to the auditory modality it is easier to conceive that listening occurs at place of contact and therefore the place of the perceiving body.

When it comes to the visible modality, the third modality which is touch makes this understanding difficult because it is very often coupled with the visible. This visuo-tactile coupling often coating in error but as soon as it is a question of sound phenomena, the sound topology as much as visible are detached from this tangible topology.

Another operational consequence that emerges here is the configuration of these sensitive topologies constituting the same sensitive body. We have shown in this respect that the main difference between domestic space and public space is precisely this configuration where the sound topology exceeds the limit of the visible topology of the domestic sphere while the configuration is reversed in public space where sight goes further than hearing (Boubezari, 1997).

The Paradigm of Sensitive Topologies

These sensitive topologies, when observed in-situ are no longer just simple bodies but are made up of several bodies themselves in what we often call singular or relevant “situations” which define atmospheres.

In a previous research (Boubezari, 2001), we saw how an inhabitant is constituted by being, *modus essendi*, when he realizes his comfort by mobilizing the adequate device for a given situation or atmosphere. It was then a question of observing its interaction

with its built space and immediate sensitive environment. This interaction constituted it into a sensitive topology. And in cases where he was in company with other roommates, or audible neighbors, the situation became more complex because two sensitive topologies came into contact. This contact of two (or more) bodies enters a *modus vivendi* to merge into one, that of a more complex body, otherwise they separate and isolate themselves. To do this, they intelligently mobilize the resources of the system and its own flexibility to be modulated.

From this observation what can we draw from it as a relationship between the three sensitive modalities mentioned above, the visible the audible and the tangible?

First, the tangible topology is always enveloped by the two others and remains the core. It is the very meaning of the inhabited "milieu." Its field of action makes it possible to modify the configuration according to the situations is the inhabited space. Any intrusion being made by the sound or the visible alert on the *modus vivendi* to set up, of repulsion of maintaining distance or fusion. "We don't touch each other, we define how we see and listen to each other."

Secondly, in this incessant movement of sensitive topologies there is a very precise operating mode which depends on the codes which define these topologies. Indeed, we have observed that once constituted as a being, *modi essendi*, the inhabitant ends up constituting himself as a sign. To become one with its direct environment, the information structuring it is readable at the level of its topology because it carries a set of "ambient" codes that will allow the attraction and therefore the fusion: "being together" or "doing together," or else the maintenance or otherwise the separation which leads to isolation and consequently the maintenance of the codes of each of the topologies. They also merge their codes which are often the same. Perceptual attention is the driving force behind this mode of decoding the surrounding topologies. The body is constituted as a sign, *modi signandi*.

Finally, thirdly, strategically, the inhabitant often anticipates these tensions or creates them by what we have called modes of signifying, *modi significandi*, he will introduce his intention. It will translate its intention into readable codes at the level of its visible or audible topology. He takes control of what his environment can or must mean beyond. A metalanguage then starts with its neighborhood.

Once the comfort in its inhabited space has been controlled, the milieu is recognized by the sensitive limits where the tangible topology of the body can move there to the limits of the visible and audible topologies; the appropriated territory. We technically called this topology "usage area."

What then is the window in the domestic space in the light of sensitive topologies? This opening device deploys the visible topologies beyond the domestic sphere, beyond the field of action and movement of the body and its transforming action of the milieu. This territory where only visible and audible topologies are spread, but not tangible topology, is what we can call, from the paradigm of sensitive topology, the landscape or the soundscape.

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