# *Associative Listening*

by Darren Copeland

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People can shape ideas about the world and themselves just by listening to the associations triggered by sounds. Here is one example:

> Is it true that the blind live in their bodies rather than in the world? I am aware of my body just as I am aware of the rain. My body is similarly made up of many patterns, many different regularities and irregularities, extended in space from down there to up here. These dimensions and details reveal themselves more and more as I concentrate my attention upon them. Nothing corresponds visually to this realization. Instead of having an image of my body, as being in what we call the "human form," I apprehend it now as these arrangements of sensitivities, a conscious space comparable to the patterns of falling rain.…[1]

This passage comes from John Hull's autobiography *Touching the Rock*, which is a work that has often been cited in soundscape research since its initial publication about ten years ago. The entire book is derived from diary entries recorded into a Dictaphone: a process that helped Hull understand the finality of total blindness after over twenty years of gradual vision loss caused by cataracts. Not surprisingly, his anecdotes in *Touching the Rock* revolve around comparisons of what life is for sighted people to what it is for blind people.

**Across The Acoustic Horizon**

I had the opportunity of interviewing John Hull in Birmingham, England in July of 1997. Four excerpts from the interview provide the basis for investigating listening without sight. Like in *Touching the Rock*, Hull often compares the experience of life from different sensory modalities. The concept of horizon, for example, varies according to the particular senses available to an individual.

> Now I would suppose that if a person was both blind and profoundly deaf, the perimeter of experience is the skin. You are aware of what your body is touching, and you're aware of fragrances, breezes, but no further. If it doesn't impinge upon your body in some way, then it doesn't exist for you.
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> What sound does, is to create an environment. That's why I say in one of my books thunder is like scratching. Why is thunder like scratching? Because it sets a perimeter. Your sensations are bounded by skin, and your world is bounded by thunder. Now if you go up, there is nothing up at all. You're just in a boundless infinity of space. As I suppose a sighted person could readily imagine. If you imagine yourself plunged into total total darkness: no stars, no clouds, no street lamps. What is around you? Where are you? You've got no environment. But sound gives you that sort of horizon of place within which you can situate yourself.[2]

Sound tells the blind person about place. The process of identifying people begins the moment they make a sound; no matter how incidental the sound. The blind listener, on the basis of a half-utterance or a few strides along a path, may need to resolve several questions: Is that a woman or a man? Do I know that person? Is he or she coming towards me? Could I be standing in his or her way? And so on.

The acoustic environment, therefore, presents the world as it exists outside of the blind person's body. The blind listener can determine, for instance, whether he or she is on a main or residential street, simply by paying attention to the patterns in the traffic sounds. A different example of how sounds "photograph" a surrounding space, is a large clock tower at the University of Birmingham. The tolling of that clock sounds different wherever one happens to be on campus. This is due to the physical distance between listener and bell, as well as the varying ratios of direct and reflected sound. It is also due to the types of echoes and reverberations heard in different outdoor spaces, as well as the effects of masking in particular areas. Every time the clock strikes a different person gets a unique acoustic impression of structures normally considered to be immobile and silent. Flash, the bell strikes, and one has an exemplification of how sound expresses both time and space in the same snapshot of existence. Interestingly, the buildings play as much of a role in the composition of this snapshot as the tolling bell.

Blind people compose their image of a particular place on the basis of connecting a series of isolated acoustic (and other non-visual) experiences. Something happens—it seizes attention—and a new feature is added to the overall impression. All of the evidence about a place seems to fall out of the blue as it were. It is as if sounds place photographs in the hands of the blind listener, but often these photos are provided without warning. In the following, John Hull illustrates the immediacy with which experiences often unfold.

> I think that for a blind person there is no intermediate space. Things are either there or they're not there. You know, you are walking along the road and suddenly a tree hits you smack in the face. It wasn't there a minute ago—now it's there. Of course that would be unimaginable for a sighted person, who would just never walk straight into a tree.
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> For sighted people: another person approaches, you see the person a long way away, or coming around the corner. And they get bigger as they approach you, don't they? And finally, they are within shouting distance. Et cetera, et cetera. At last, you shake hands. None of that intermediate space exists for a blind person. All of a sudden you are grabbed, you are greeted. Somebody calls your name from a few feet away. Now I think that changes the sense of distance and nearness for a blind person.[3]

The immediacy of the moment, or the lack of intermediate transitions, distinguishes the blind person's impression of space from that of a sighted person. The dominant feeling is that the world is

full of perpetual motion and change. Sounds are dynamic and transient. They are soft at one moment, and then unexpectedly loud at another. They can lurk in the distance for a while, and then suddenly, brush against you. One can never predict their arrival or departure. Acoustic experience is, therefore, a whirlwind of unannounced change.

> Well, pictures of things are static, aren't they? You know, the picture you have of a building; it's just standing there, doesn't move around. Now you never have a sound like that. The sound is always mobile. So in a blind person's world nothing will stand still. Those footprints now, they walk away from us. Now they've stopped, and the person has disappeared. In a sighted person's world things are both mobile and still—a mixture, aren't they? But in a blind person's world everything moves—everything is dynamic. If it stops moving then it is silent. In other words it disappears. To move is to exist.[4]

The dynamic sonic environment can appear, in one moment, like a calm blanket muting every possible murmur. Then without warning, it can shower the blind person with a flood of new distractions that beg for undivided attention. When something moves, or sounds, the blind person must take notice. The object moves and produces a sound. The sound approaches, decays, and drifts away. He or she must keep track of the sound until it dissolves completely into the peaceful silence from which it suddenly arose. Perhaps he or she will take a mental note for future reference. Sounding objects come and go, but invariably some will return again.

Intrusions of noise, therefore, have different repercussions for the blind person. What might merely disturb the peace of those who see and hear can outright stop a blind person in his or her tracks. It's not the annoyance that is at issue here, but the utter seizure of one's individuality and control upon the environment. Perhaps this situation demonstrates a new dimension to the meaning of noise. Noise is more than just unwanted sound. Noise is also the total occupation of one's consciousness from an unexpected, and certainly uninvited, external sound source. The difficulty in this situation, as the next excerpt will illustrate, is that the blind person has no other alternative but to give him or herself up to this overwhelming intrusion. He or she will have to forfeit individual control until the intrusion has unquestionably gone away.

> Of course another difference arises out of the fact that you can close your eyes if you don't like that building, but you can't close your ears if you don't like that sound. So, the blind person's environment is irresistible. It bursts in upon one, in a way, which is not true of the sighted person's world. He can control it by shutting his eyes. He can bring it back into focus at will. But the blind person can't do that with the sounds.
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> … When, for example, I am standing by the bleeped crossing in the Bristol Road, and one of these huge vehicles (or some fire carts) roars past, I can feel that post shaking and the ground is vibrating under my feet. And then it's all gone. But I have to pause there for a moment. If the bleep then sounds I can't instantly cross. I have to somehow gather myself for a moment, and make sure that my senses … it's just slightly dazing, slightly shocking. It's like a dazzle. It's as if I've been acoustically dazzled. That's what it's like.
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> And also, the sighted person knows the split second the thing has past, because there is your visual image of it going past. You know it's not going to stop and come back towards you. But for the blind person, the sound roars to a crescendo, and then it starts to die away—you are pretty sure it's gone, but you wait. For one thing, maybe there is another one coming along behind that was masked. So you have to wait until it is quiet again. Now that's peculiar to a blind person. So it's not just the dazzle. It's the acoustic corruption of the environment, which has to settle, before you feel safe to step out.[5]

### Associative Listening

All of these interview excerpts show in different ways the extent to which blind people immerse themselves in their surroundings. The primary channel for this immersion is the ear. Before concluding, I would like to underscore the importance for creatively engaging in the experiences that pass through us acoustically. Hull's sensitivity to environmental sounds show how they can occupy and frame our deeper emotional experiences—no matter how banal, annoying, or beautiful they might seem. For example, a sighted person's memory of friends or family is not always complete with the memory of their looks alone. In fact, the visual memories reside within the actions of those people. These actions usually include sounds. Therefore, the sounds of people and the sounds of environments are containers of experience. Every breath outward swims with the sounds of the environment while every intake of breath drinks in the sounds of the environment. Whether one chooses to admit it or not, sound resides within one's existence and sustains it. Sighted people experience this envelopment all the time. They are just less aware of it than blind people are.

However, despite the pervasive presence of environmental sound in any hearing person's life, there remains a peculiar predicament: people generally lack the means to express themselves creatively through sounds, where sounds become, like visual images, carriers of social meaning. Sounds from the environment remain tucked away in the undervalued realm of functional utility. Only when there is more understanding of the connection between sounds and other levels of experience, for instance emotions, can sounds be attributed with the potential to carry associative properties.

It would be good to forecast the day when the sonic arts could access a symbolic vocabulary composed of sounds from the everyday world. A language that would be sophisticated enough in its specific cultural associations to put it on par with the vocabulary available to the visual arts. However, vocabularies only develop from a culturally motivated intellectual desire. At this time, environmental sounds function as mere indicators of place, and little more. This is especially evident in the treatment of environmental sounds in conventional Hollywood sound design. There they serve as simple statements of fact or as extensions and cushions to visual effects. Rarely do they resonate metaphorically or serve as a thematic thread for the film.

The usage of environmental sound in acousmatic art suffers from a similar single-mindedness, to cite another example. In this case, environmental sounds are exploited only for their latent musical properties. The social baggage these sounds contain, and the metaphors that lurk within them, often remain unchecked in the acousmatic discourse. There are exceptional occasions, where the bags are opened up and the clothes inside are worn. They are occurring more frequently, as the practice of acousmatic art fuses with that of soundscape composition and draws influence from the ground breaking soundscape research of the seventies. However, even in these developments there is still a great deal of ambivalence about what is being said or not said. The composer may have one inter-

pretation, but the listeners may have varying interpretations that agree and disagree with the composer. The medium seems plagued with ambiguity, due perhaps to the absence of a vocabulary to articulate an informed interpretation.

Without conscientious efforts to approach environmental sounds with some imagination and a sensitive social awareness, the language for coping with the everyday sound world will remain crude and ineffectual. If sound shapes people's experience in the world, then a vocabulary for documenting this interrelationship needs to develop. John Hull provides one example. He hears a sound around him. It affects him in a certain way. The impact on his mind leads to a chain of related thoughts and musings. He then records these thoughts into a Dictaphone and later shapes them into a piece of writing. The whole process, in my opinion, is informed by associative listening. On the basis of such listening, can one ever approach the enormous task of reading the acoustic environment as a record of social experience?

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1 John M. Hull: *Touching The Rock.* SPCK, Great Britain,1990. A new expanded reprint is available under a new title: *On Sight and Insight: a Journey into the World of Blindness.* Oxford: One World Books, 1997. ISBN: 1851 681418.
2 Personal interview with John Hull. Recorded on July 7, 1997 at the University of Birmingham in the UK. Special thanks to Joe Anderson for recording production.
3-5 Ibid.

# Current Research (continued from page19)

## Acoustic Environments in Change: Five Village Soundscapes Revisited

A Research Report by Helmi Järviluoma

One of the sound projects that keeps several Finnish researchers busy during this spring of 2000 is *Acoustic Environments in Change (AEC): Improvement of sustainable qualities and strategies for local action.* AEC is a Europe-wide initiative, coordinated by myself, and involving various researchers studying the relationships between the soundscape, the environment, and its various inhabitants.

The project is based on two earlier important, empirical soundscape studies: *The Vancouver Soundscape* (Schafer et al. 1974) and *Five Village Soundscapes* (Schafer et al. 1977). In 1975, five European villages were visited by a group of Canadian soundscape researchers and members of the "World Soundscape Project" (WSP). The villages were in Brittany (France), Sweden, Scotland, Germany, and Italy. The group looked at—or rather listened to—the interplay between the soundscape of each community and its social, cultural and natural make-up.

The AEC project is re-visiting the villages in 2000 to undertake comparative studies, and at the same time is adding new community based initiatives and approaches to the soundscape. In addition, we will study the acoustic ecology of one Finnish village. The goals of the research are the following:

1) to study the changes in the soundscapes of six European villages;
2) to develop a rigorous methodology and theory for the analysis of acoustic environments;
3) to create concrete means that will help each of the localities in re-designing and re-constructing its soundscapes.

Although it is important that the relevant literature on the topic be analysed, it is more pertinent, that the methods and theories are developed via concrete, on-location soundscape analyses. The participants of the research group come from six European countries, and work in close collaboration with some of the Canadian original members of the World Soundscape Project, who are pioneers in the field. One of our aims is, by using today's knowledge, to develop further the methods, concepts and theories of acoustic ecology that are to be found in the 1977 research report.

The duration of this phase of the research will be approximately three years. It will provide the necessary foundation from which to formulate the concrete means to move toward the objectives mentioned above, in goal three. This phase will involve further cooperation with local architects and community planners, among others, to develop more tools for planning the soundscapes of their communities with a deeper ecological consciousness.

The main field research is proceeding during the spring of 2000. Apart from other visits, each village will be visited at approximately the same time of year as during the earlier Five Village Study: between February 8 and June of 2000.

The Tampere School of Art and Communication is sending environmental and media arts students to each of the villages. Among other things, they are sending sound diaries, pictures and sounds *daily* to our Internet site.

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