Acoustic Territoriality and the Politics of Urban Noise

By Jacob Kreutzfeldt

Within recent years studies in urban culture have found inspiration from new paradigms and methods in the field of cultural geography. Instead of just mapping the physical character of the city structure, cultural geographers look closely at the culturally constructed meaning of places in the city. Reflected in such practices is a shift in focus from the mapping and the construction of a symbolic city around the core of historically founded identity, towards the city periphery and the meanings ascribed to the urban fabric through use. The multiple perspectives of everyday culture, mobility and the network city have come to supplement the central perspective of symbolic mapping.

Anticipating this development, the French cultural critic Roland Barthes, in a lecture from 1967 on "Semiology and Urbanism" and later in his essay about Japan's *Empire of Signs* (1970), uses Tokyo as a testing ground for an urban semiology; one that substitutes the classical idea of power emanating from a symbolic centre, with that of meanings projected into multiple centers and locations through everyday practices of trade, transportation and imagination. An analysis of the urban, argues Barthes, should not limit itself to the meanings inscribed to the city through the planning process, but should proceed to incorporate the ongoing scripting of the city performed by the users – they who attribute to the city difference and meaning.

What I will present here may be understood as an attempt to comply with the appeal made by Roland Barthes in "Semiology and Urbanism": to multiply not only the functional studies of the city, but also, and not the least, the readings of the city. I will pursue the hypothesis that studies of urban sound may not only be operational in leading to better sonic environments, but also such studies could be a useful resource for planners, architects, designers, politicians etc. wishing to analyze the social dynamics of urban life.

Natural soundscapes

In his main theoretical work *The Tuning of the World*, the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer conceptualizes and systematizes an aesthetic approach to sonic environments, which to a large extend underlies the environmentalist politics of contemporary sound space. Schafer's general call is for the maintaining of hi-fi soundscapes – that is, environments where all sounds may be heard "clearly without crowding or masking" (1977, 272). Such soundscapes are considered to reflect a natural, organic and pleasant community. On the other hand, the overloaded sound environments of modern cities are what Schafer calls lo-fi, resulting in a lack of distance and perspective, displaying only presence. Of course, such environments incorporate a considerable amount of unwanted sound, which is how Schafer defines noise.

While on the one hand I agree with Schafer's central methodological claim that environments can be analyzed and designed through sound, on the other hand, I think it is worth questioning some of the notions and values invested in Schafer's project. It seems urban

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culture has already gone a far way since Schafer coined his concepts. It may even be, that Schafer, with his dislike for modern noise, was already a stranger to the modern Vancouver that was amongst his study objects. It is no secret that upon the termination of his employment at Simon Fraser University in 1975, he moved away from the city with the intent of never coming back to urban life.

Urban sound design

I arrived in Osaka in 2004 with the intent of studying Japanese sound culture, and with Schafer's work in my bag. Upon arrival I was struck by the intensity of broadcasted sound in public and semi-public space. I was annoyed, disturbed and puzzled by music streaming from hidden speakers in every shopping area, with talking elevators and the like. The immensity of sound sources clearly constructed what Schafer would call a lo-fi soundscape. Going from irritation to acceptance and later to critical interest, I started to ask myself if Schafer was not too idealistic in his claims for modern sonic environments? The call for hi-fi soundscapes seemed out of line with the realities of a modern metropolitan culture. In many cases the alternative to broadcasted music would be metamorphous urban humming from cars, trains and planes. While taking a closer look

at my own neighborhood while living in Japan, Ishibashi, it seemed quite possible that the installation of a sound system in two main streets (sometime in the second half of the 20th century) was actually a reaction to noisy urbanization of the village it used to be. Acting as a masque for external noise from a dramatically increased density of highways, trains and incoming flights, the music from speakers in the streets established and upheld, rather than corrupted, the community of Ishibashi.

Banal as such realization may seem, it did rearrange the subject of sonic environments in a whole new way, since questions of authenticity now carried less weight than aspects of design and territorialisation. The sound of Ishibashi seemed less to reflect a historical core, but rather it was subjected to processes of shaping and organization of its cultural meaning. The sound system participated in building a place in contrast to the surrounding suburban sprawl through the effects of masking external sounds, the ubiquity of the broadcasted sound within the area and the repetition of sound bites. Of course the aim of such marking was ultimately commercial, since it was partaken by the local trades organization *Ishibashi Shôtengai*. But it would make little sense to find in this practice a control from above, since most shop keepers lived in the area – many even at the first floors of the buildings that housed the shop.

I would like to outline some features for a theory on urban sonic environments. First I would suggest downscaling the notion of authenticity, which so often underlies common discourse on urban sound. Though urban planning has an urge for the authentic place – meaning the historically and symbolically loaded place, within the field of urbanity such places are generally designed and carefully maintained. Similarly, when dealing with sonic environments, authenticity cannot be constructed through processes of elimination of contemporary sounds. The urban soundscape rarely expresses a historically founded place-identity, and more often it articulates the social practices of people inhabiting and using the place.

This is not to say, that "anything goes" when designing and evaluating sound environments. It is easy to detect social tensions arising from sound design practices, as that of Ishibashi trades organization. Testimonies from shop staff in the area cast light on mechanisms of reterritorialisations, through which shop owners carve out their own "defensible space" within the area aurally signified by the trade organization. Shops in Ishibashi largely use their own sound systems, not to attract costumers, they say, but to avoid listening to endlessly repeated music streaming from other loudspeakers (Kreutzfeldt 2006). Each sitting in their own sound domain, the shop staff may have experienced some kind of autonomy, while at the same time undermining the correspondence between inner and outer, so dear to modern cityscapes – particularly the Japanese.

Ecology and acoustic territoriality

Before proceeding to the discussion of the Ishibashi case study, I will take a moment to consider the concept of ecology introduced to soundscape studies by R. Murray Schafer and frequently discussed in this journal. Both Johan Redström (1998) and Gregg Wagstaff (1998) have warned us about aesthetic moralism as a pitfall for the ecological concerns of acoustic ecology. While attempts at defining desirable sonic environments through musical aesthetics may have its problems, inspiration may still be found in the biological discipline of ecology or ethology. Looking at the etymology of the concept of 'ecology' it is possible to distinguish between two uses of the word, one older and one more modern. According to The Oxford English Dictionary, the term 'ecology' developed during the later part of the 19th century as a branch of biology investigating "the relationships of living organisms to their surroundings", whereas a modern version of the word, developed a century later, refers to "issues such as industrial pollution considered in a political context" (Vol. 5, 58). Following the initial definition by Ernst Haeckel, the discipline of ecology sets out to investigate "all the various relationships of animals and plants to one another and to the outer world" (*Ibid.*); however, once the word became more widespread and found usage within environmentalist discourses, concerns for relationships between individual organisms and their surroundings tended to prioritize the effect of the surrounding on the individual. Today we see a strengthened interest into environmental effects; for instance, the European Union-initiated project for *Assessment and Management of Environmental Noise* is concerned with "the harmful effects of exposure to environmental noise", but at the same time, noise "caused by the exposed person himself" is explicitly excluded (2002, 1).

R. Murray Schafer defines the subject of acoustic ecology with a significant slide of meaning:

> Ecology is the study of the relationship between living organisms and their environment. Acoustic ecology is thus the study of the effects of the acoustic environment or SOUNDSCAPE on the physical responses or behavioral characteristics of creatures living within it. Its particular aim is to draw attention to imbalances which may have unhealthy or inimical effects. (1977, 271)

While ecology is here defined as a relationship, acoustic ecology becomes the effect of the environment on the creatures. Such slide of meaning does not seem to be due to specific acoustic properties, since the sensorimotor pair constituted by listening and sound-making seems at least as close as any similar visual or olfactory pairs, but rather reflects a general displacement in the concept of the environment in times of environmentalism. While the calculation of health-risks is often conceptualized in terms of exposure to stimuli, a more thorough investigation of how people situate themselves within an auditory environment may gain from closer looks at the interactions through which environments are shaped and experienced.

Keeping in line with the vocabulary of ethological, ecological and environmental studies, I use the concept of territorialisation for such practices of marking more or less exclusive places. In the field of ethology, studies of territoriality cover a vast range of animal practices of appropriating space. In his introduction to the field, *Ethology: The Biology of Behavior*, Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt defines territoriality as a practice of marking "a space in which one animal or a group generally dominates others, which in turn may become dominant elsewhere." (1975, 340). Lately, few studies have been done in the field of human territoriality, the most prominent authors

being Robert David Sack and Torsten Malmberg. The latter defines territoriality in the following way:

> Human behavioural territoriality is primarily a phenomenon of ethological ecology with an instinctive nucleus, manifested as more or less exclusive spaces, to which individuals or groups of human beings are bound emotionally and which, for the possible avoidance of others, are distinguished by means of limits, marks or other kinds of structuring with adherent display, movement or aggressiveness. (1980, 10–11).

With inspiration from such studies as well as from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, I have argued elsewhere that the concept of acoustic territoriality could be effective in directing attention to a tendency to mark spaces, be they human or animal, acoustically (Kreutzfeldt 2009). It is not only birds that give voice to the spaces and places of their everyday life. The shaping of environments and production of atmospheres take place everyday, everywhere – often without the intervention of architects, planners or politicians. Brandon Labelle has recently taken up the studies of everyday urban acoustics under the heading of *Acoustic Territories* (2010), and much further work could be done in the field, keeping in mind that human territoriality only rarely takes the shape of geo-political entities but much more often unfolds through overlapping, competing and concurrent marking practices.

Urban noise

Keeping an eye on both the historically founded character of places and on social displacements and political negotiations taking place, studies of urban sonic environments may investigate the limits and marks through which space is managed. To find a helpful notion for understanding the specificities of urban sound environment, I would like to discuss another concept which R. Murray Schafer adopted from modern acoustics: noise.

In *The Tuning of the World,* Schafer defines noise as "any unwanted sound" (182) and thereby gives the concept a very subjective meaning. What is noise for me may not necessarily be noise for you. Such definition derives from the field of electro acoustics and communication theory, where any disturbance to an intended signal may be called noise. For example when listening to radio it is reasonably easy to distinguish between the signals transmitted and the extra noise received. But – a bit like with the concept of hi-fi – it may be difficult when listening to environmental sound to decide what is signal and what is noise.

Interestingly, when Schafer discusses the concept of noise in *The New Soundscape* (1969), he introduces another, older, definition of noise, which may be useful to this discussion. In a class discussion, Schafer demonstrates how the purity of sound can be analyzed and visualized on an oscilloscope. Referring to Hermann von Helmholtz's definition of noise as a sensation due to non-periodic motions, he illustrates the complexity and irregularity of acoustic noise. Indeed, noise may still be understood as sounds, which are impure and irregular – sounds that are neither tone nor rhythm. Of course the strict mechanical definition is once again difficult to transfer to environmental situations. But the notion of noise as that which is irregular, complex and improvised may prove to be more useful to a discussion of urban sound space than the idea of unwanted sound. Isn't the irregular, the complex and unforeseeable exactly the nature of urban sound space, where voices and sounds blend and interrupt each other constantly?

Once again returning to the sales staff in Ishibashi, it is significant that their defensive reaction to the music played through the loudspeakers system does not seem to be due to the experience of these sounds as unwanted. Actually, the shopkeepers themselves

promote the system, supporting and cherishing it when asked about its presence (Kreutzfeldt 2006). Their reaction rather seems to be caused by the endless repetition of the broadcastings. The Ishibashi broadcastings consists of 20-minute tapes repeated over and over again. Thus, it is not because the sound from the loudspeakers in the streets is unwanted to the shop people, rather they react because they experience the sound as an unbearable repetition, an intolerable automatism acting as a homogenization of time and place.

Following such lines of reflection, I would like to suggest, as a second proposition for a theory of urban sonic environments, that an essential element of urbanism is that noise (meaning the irregular and complex) may happen. It is important here to emphasize, that noise should not be a permanent condition, but on the reverse, it would not be an urban sound environment, if noise was never heard. Consequently, the greatest threat to urban sound environments is not that of noise, but – reversibly – that of homogenization. While Schafer argues for 'cleaner' sound environments, why not rather aim for more diverse sound environments? Environments in which many different social practices, groups and classes are not only visible, but also audible? The environment that accommodates noise may be the most socially inclusive environment.

Deterritorialisation and co-existence

Proceeding I would now like to draw some distinctions regarding territorialisation and de-territorialisation of urban space through sound, in a way to consider the role of noise in urban culture. I borrow these concepts from Deleuze and Guattari, who have developed a whole philosophy around them (1980).

As I stated earlier, the use of live music in the streets of the city may act as a territorialisation of urban space producing signified places

within the relatively unsignified city space. In Ishibashi, this practice of territorialisation is mirrored in the trade organization's sound system and in the local sound systems of each shop. By enlarging the scope of the study through the integration of material generated by interviews with leaders of two other shopping streets in Osaka, it becomes possible to observe a general tendency for increased control over shopping streets by the trade organization. In both Tenjimbashi 5 shopping street and Shinsaibashi-suji shopping street, the heads of the trade organizations told me that the general policy is to not tolerate sales calls and street musicians within the area. Such practices are disturbing the atmosphere carefully constructed through visual and auditory displays in the city scene, they argue.

In the context of such tendency it is interesting to hear, in Ishibashi, the emergence of sales calls carefully adapted to the acoustic and social situation within the shopping arcade. For instance, one may hear, from the local fish shop, calls that blend into the surroundings, transforming and appropriating the (sonic) environment. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, I would like to suggest the concept of 'the ritornello' for such deterritorializing practices, developed through a kind of ritualization closely related to the concrete place, and surprisingly sensitive to the music that is constantly broadcast. Such calling may be understood as the very paradigm of acoustic urban creativity, thus occupying the role of urban noise suggested above.

What differentiates broadcastings of music from sales calls is an acoustic openness and sensitiveness to the surroundings. While the music may act as a functional masque against external sounds, thus producing a rupture between inside and outside, the calls produce fleeting and temporary differences within a signified field, by means of adaption and appropriation. The same may be true with several unheard and unconsidered ritualized acoustic practices in the city. As a third and final proposition for a theory of urban sound environments, I would like to suggest the significance of overheard everyday sounds, sounds of human practices, organic, ritualized and immensely significant as mechanisms for producing difference and meaning in the city.

Parts of this article were presented at the 8th Academic Forum on Urban Cultural Research *at Chulalong University Bangkok March 10, 2010. Other parts were presented at the* Ljudmiljö, hälsa och stadsbygnad Symposium *at Lunds University May 7, 2010.*

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