Living Out Loud

by Vicki Reed

This essay is the first installment in what we hope will be a series of longer contributions to Soundscape *by students and younger people. It was originally written as a "Noise Pollution Essay" for Acoustic Dimensions of Communication, CMNS 259, offered through Distance Education, at Simon Fraser University, , Burnaby, B.C., Canada.*

The term *consumer culture* is thrown about with relative ease these days, but it is our appetite for deconstruction that is most voracious. We have developed a tendency to break the issues of our time—and our time is precious—into the simplest, handiest terms and phrases and ideas. Now, an argument that can fit in your pocket does travel well, but constant snacking on sound bites can leave us with a real mess on our hands, especially when, seeking clarity, we have carved away the nuances of an issue as a whole. Even worse, pockets full, we may forget that we have pulled the world into a puzzle of our own design, and that the cuts, made for the sake of convenience, are actually quite arbitrary. We then may assume that the world falls to pieces of its own accord, and find ourselves standing idly by, wondering at the rumble.

The rumble is getting louder. Sound pollution in the commons is growing, but such growth is not an event borne of nature, it is merely the culmination of the choices we have made. To find the place where we chose to make noise, we must look at the hidden decisions and assumptions that mark our ways of understanding and interacting with our environment. First, we should notice how we define our terms.

R. Murray Schafer has stated that *noise* has four main meanings: It is used to refer to "unwanted sound," "unmusical sound," "any loud sound," or "disturbance in any signaling system."[1] As Susan Frykberg notes, "unwanted sound" is the definition used "most commonly."[2] However, as Schafer's definition indicates, *noise* is also commonly associated with loudness, and *noise pollution* is generally used to refer to sounds that cause ill effects, both physiological and psychological, because of that aspect of their form.

One of the benefits of defining noise pollution as an effect of volume level is that volume level, or intensity, can be accurately measured, and acceptable levels can be clearly and numerically defined. Since "medical science has determined that sounds over 85 decibels, heard continuously over long periods of time, pose a serious threat to hearing,"[3] communities can build their by-laws around the sturdy number "85." Of course, words like 'continuously,' as used above, add a problematic touch of gray to numbers' black and white, but still, volume is the quality of noise that appears most readily quantifiable.

Volume is also the aspect of sound which listeners are most able to perceive as being controllable by them: some radios and television sets have controls for adjusting sound qualities like bass and treble, but all have controls for adjusting volume. We tend to assume that if a sound is made, there must be some way to adjust its volume; the only trick is figuring out where the knob is or who has access to it. When a noise is irritating, then, our first response is to try to "turn it down." We can "get a handle on" *volume*.

The ability to grasp an issue, to see a clear causal link, is important at many levels of any discussion about noise pollution and its effects. Few people truly attend to what they hear. They are not used to listening for all the components of their soundscape, and all the subtle characteristics of each of those components. And if they do consciously attend to their soundscape, few can translate their impressions into words that can convey the sounds they have experienced to another. Volume is the characteristic that presents numbers we can all understand (even *Spinal Tap's* "… turn it up to eleven" is coherent).

"Unwanted," "unmusical," "loud," "disturbance"—Schafer's definitions of *noise* rest on notions that vary with the ears and minds of the beholders; clearly *noise pollution*, even if it is used solely to refer to issues of volume, will be a concept that incurs debate and conjecture, and legal challenge. Further, the "four main physiological effects of noise: hearing loss, stress, fatigue, and sleep disturbance,"[4] are themselves diagnosed by evidence that is anecdotal: the last three are subjectively reported and unquantifiable; the first can result from a variety of interacting causes, including "occupational noise exposure, aging (or presbycusis), and social noise exposure (or sociocusis)."[5] So, though noise pollution may be shown to be a factor which possibly contributes to a variety of ill effects, the subjectivities inherent in the argument, and the general lack of experience within the populace for ably conceptualizing and communicating sound qualities, make it difficult to convey the importance of the issue through a community's by-laws, much less effectively enforce them. Schafer agrees:

> I have frequently stated throughout this book that the real value of anti-noise legislation is not the degree of its efficiency—for, at least since the Deluge, it has never been efficient—but rather that it affords us comparative catalogues of sound phobias from different societies and different times.[6]

The ambient noise level of our cities "is continuing to rise, perhaps by as much as 0.5 dB per year."[7] Isolating and governing one aspect of the soundscape (i.e. volume) is inefficient and, finally, impossible. The aural world will not allow itself to be so neatly packaged.

Perhaps the only way to fully address the problem is to allow *noise* pollution to return to its place as a subset of *sound* pollution. Barry Truax has defined sound pollution as: "An imbalance in a soundscape caused by intruding or disrupting sound of any kind. Such an intrusion need not necessarily be excessively loud … but rather it needs only to have characteristics which disturb the perceived balance of the soundscape."[8] Sound pollution, then, is admittedly and emphatically in the mind of the beholder.

One of the most interesting aspects of sound pollution is that the complainant is, in a not-too-broad sense, also the perpetrator: the community is annoying itself. We know that there are certain volume/duration thresholds at which measurable physical damage is done to the listener. Why are we steadily moving towards our threshold, rather than making a *concerted* effort to keep our overall

sound volume levels as low as possible? Why are we choosing to get louder?

I think there is, in this culture, a tendency to equate strength and power with loudness. The king of the jungle roars. And, when other forms of expression of power are discouraged, or outnumbered and drowned in the tumult of too many lions sounding at once, the dominant mode for expression of power becomes the only accepted, and hence the only effective, one. We could learn again to appreciate the subtleties of the sonic world; our aural decline is the result of disuse. But this would involve a move to a new emphasis in education and in focus, and ours is a society that likes to embrace the easiest answer, the simplest paradigm, the clearest outline.

This tendency to reduce meaning to its least nuanced form is found throughout our culture. Having been away from television for a while, I was struck by the way the medium is being used to transmit a message with a single tone broken into succinct sound bites; the dominant culture has the tonal pulse of a dump truck backing up. I was watching the coverage of the massacre at Columbine High School on the American television stations. Each clip was brief, speakers were forced to voice their opinions within a few seconds; if they dallied they were cut-off, or the camera moved to another subject, or a commercial was run—each new element presented with the same level of emphasis, of importance, of volume; each allowed the same amount of airtime, status, and impact. The tragedy was as tightly packaged as the coffee it was used to sell, and it carried a strong jolt of the familiar. As Noam Chomsky has observed, the short sound bite allows only confirmation of the dominant theme; counter-arguments need factual support, and when there is not enough time for such support to be given, all counter-arguments, and all new arguments, are reduced to meaningless babble—short, staccato, mono-toned, monotonous. The dominant message, then, becomes the single, shallow, endlessly repeated tone of the culture.

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If the dissenting voice is rendered silent, then the only way to be heard in the crowd is to be the loudest. Power is expressed not through being *different*, but through being *more*. The only direction then is up, more, faster, louder. And *more* becomes the emblem of strength and individuality, the means of personal achievement and identity. Many analysts of the Columbine tragedy commented on the assailants' "need to be heard," to "get attention and stand out." When words, opinions, and concepts are everywhere abstracted into a homogenous whole, the fight for identity becomes a matter of the survival of the loudest, and we are left not only with a culture of sonic and social one-up-man-ship, but also a populace that no longer realizes that it has a myriad of other options.

Schafer again: "I insisted that the only realistic way to approach the noise pollution problem was to study the total soundscape as a prelude to comprehensive acoustic design."[9] Schafer highlights the necessity of retaining a full "view" of the total soundscape when addressing the problem of noise pollution. Similarly, the complex issue of noise pollution cannot be reduced to an issue of volume. Volume, when replaced into a broader context, is revealed to be no less complex than noise pollution, than sound pollution, than the soundscape, than the community as a whole.

When the soundscape is reduced to the sum of its pieces, it is easy to lose sight of the complexity of the puzzle. What seem like natural abstractions of a whole into parts are really arbitrary splits—and the hand on the controls is indeed our own. When we can grasp this, we will be more able to make the adjustments we need. If we forget, our culture will bleat like a garbage truck. We are the dreamer, not the dreamed, and we can re-imagine our world in any way we choose.

Which is not to say that the volume issue is an aural red herring, or a waste of the efforts to quantify and regulate it. A commons that is "too noisy to hear oneself think" is not a place that will support the insights and ideas that contribute to a healthy community, and any means to "keep the ruckus down to a dull roar"[10] should be used. But the best way to control noise pollution may be to utilize the subjectivity inherent in the concept of sound pollution—address the choices and assumptions made when defining the problem, as well as the problem itself. We have ample evidence that sound pollution is a detriment to both community well-being and individual health, still, we are becoming louder. The facts and figures fade into the din, and our clamour to be heard rises insistently, insinuating itself into both our outer world and our way of understanding it. If we can bring our knowledge of the facts together with a knowledge of ourselves, we may be able to speak in a voice we will hear. And choose to listen.

Vicki Reed has recently completed her studies in linguistics and cognitive science, rejoining the noisier world at large. She is working in film and continuing to explore her main interests—working with, and writing about, sound. She is currently fascinated by the role of sound in the sacred, and the innate sacredness of sound. Contact: vpreed@sfu.ca

Notes:

1. Schafer, R. Murray, 1994, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books.
2. Frykberg, Susan, *Acoustic Dimensions of Communication 1; Communication 259 Study Guide,* 1999, Burnaby, B.C., Canada: SFU.
3. Schafer, R. Murray, *op. cit.*
4. Frykberg, Susan, *op. cit.*
5. Ibid.
6. Schafer, R. Murray, *op. cit.*
7. Truax, Barry [ed.], 1978, *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*, Vancouver: A.R.C. Publications.
8. Ibid.
9. Schafer, R. Murray, *op. cit.*
10. Mom.