

# Schafer's and McLuhan's Listening Paths Convergences, Crossings & Diversions

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## Preface

“Viel hat von Morgen an,  
Seit ein Gespräch wir sind und hören voneinander,  
Erfahren der Mensch; bald sind wir aber Gesang.” (Hölderlin)<sup>1</sup>

“... seit ein Gespräch wir sind und hören voneinander...”/“... since we exist as conversation, listening to each other...” This is the line of a long poem by Friedrich Hölderlin, a German poet from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who is famous for his highly philosophical poetry, addressing themes of Greek mythology and essences of antique thinkers. It might seem unusual to start a lecture about two contemporary personalities, Murray Schafer and Marshall McLuhan, by referring to a German Romantic poet. However, the fragment “... since we exist as conversation, listening to each other...” seems to summarize perfectly the essence of my endeavours, to understand Murray Schafer against the backdrop of Marshall McLuhan and vice versa:

The poem talks about a common “we”, a multitude of minds, which identifies itself as a medium of communication: that of conversation. This medium is based on common rules of participation and interaction: listening, sense making, understanding and sound making i.e. practicing a dynamic relationship based on listening and soundmaking. The system of conversation assigns roles and behaviours, creates perceptual structures, coins values, forms social organizations and political systems, and can thus be considered an environment, exemplary for any medium.

This lecture is primarily about Schafer and McLuhan, but on a second level is concerned with environment as a conceptual approach or a figure of thought: creating a specific mindset and relation to world and cognition, which exclusively linear-causal approaches – as cultivated traditionally in technological, historical and sociological sciences – would not allow.

## 1. Why this topic?

One summer evening 1999, I paid a visit to media theorist Derrick de Kerckhove at the University of Toronto, and entered his base station, the famous “Coach House”, in which McLuhan already had worked. Upon entering, I noticed a huge banner quoting McLuhan: “What John Cage and his indeterminacy was for the notion of music, Murray Schafer and his soundscape was for the notion of space.” Here, a fascinating connection was made explicit, which nobody else had ever addressed yet.

This year's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of McLuhan caused me to revisit this idea.

By reading through his major works<sup>2</sup> again, the parallels between him and Schafer – foremost with *The Tuning of the World* – became obvious. Both authors' ideas illuminate each other instructively.

This is in brief what motivated me to explore the similarities and differences between McLuhan and Schafer, and to elaborate on how both their listening paths cross, move parallel, sometimes even become identical, diverge, separate, just to be found again leading into the same direction.

Indeed, I think relating acoustic ecology to the broader discourse of media and perception theory is a very necessary endeavour, as this could help soundscape theory to open up further towards trans- and interdisciplinary joint ventures, detaching it from tendencies of self-sufficient isolation or narrowing it down to a simple belief system.

## 2. Schafer's and McLuhan's common ground

### a) Biographical parallels and contemporary climate

Schafer and McLuhan were contemporaries and compatriots, one generation apart<sup>3</sup>. As Murray Schafer confirmed to me, they periodically had quite a few personal exchanges during the 1970s.

McLuhan, the elder, was without a doubt the intellectual predecessor: at the beginning of the early 1960s, he was a celebrity, with a huge global presence in media, where his ideas were discussed ubiquitously, and stood for a kind of intellectual “Zeitgeist”. Schafer sharpened his public profile from the end-1960s<sup>4</sup> on, through publications and compositions, gaining national and international acknowledgement as well as prestigious awards, however never the pop star-like image of McLuhan. It took until 1977 when Schafer's probably most important work, *The Tuning of the World*, was published and earned him a solid international reputation. Both benefited from the tolerant, innovative, intellectual and artist friendly climate during the Trudeau era in Canada.

McLuhan's famous dictum “the medium is the message” provoked the general public and academic scholars alike, as it stated, that the modeling of society's mindset would not happen through topics and opinions, but through the structural conditions of a certain technology.

(A)ll media from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment. Such an extension is an amplification of a(n) ... sense ..., and whenever it takes place, the central nervous system appears to institute

1 Friedrich Hölderlin, Hymnen (1800–1804), Friedensfeier, in Friedrich Hölderlin: *Sämtliche Werke*. Kleine Stuttgarter Ausgabe, 6 Bände, Band 3, Stuttgart 1958, also available at: [www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Hölderlin,+Friedrich/Gedichte/Gedichte+1800-1804/%5BHymnen%5D/Friedensfeier](http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Hölderlin,+Friedrich/Gedichte/Gedichte+1800-1804/%5BHymnen%5D/Friedensfeier) (08.12.2011)

2 I should mention here foremost: McLuhan, Herbert Marshall, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Toronto 1962 and McLuhan, Herbert Marshall, *Understanding Media. The extensions of man*, New York 1964.

3 McLuhan lived from 1911–1980; Schafer was born in 1933.

4 in 1967 he published his pedagogical work “*Ear Cleaning*”.

a self-protective numbing of the affected area, insulating and anesthetizing it from conscious awareness of what's happening to it.<sup>5</sup>

To understand the order of the senses as caused by electronic media and its technologies, is considered a "survival strategy"<sup>6</sup> by McLuhan: "If we understand the revolutionary transformations caused by new media, we can anticipate and control them"<sup>7</sup>, instead of remaining their slaves.

From the beginning Schafer has challenged his contemporaries, with the idea, that our ability and willingness to listen relates to an aesthetic quality in the sonic environment. By identifying cultures throughout history favouring or discouraging the auditory sense, he has been stating that sensory perception is connected with societal circumstances and the different societies' core values. These values are represented by technologies to a huge extent, or more precisely, by society's specific relationships between technology and nature. One could paraphrase and adapt McLuhan's above mentioned statement, and apply it to Schafer, stating: "If we understand the revolutionary influences on the faculty of listening caused by technologies and media, we can free ourselves from them, instead of accepting the resulting perceptual reductions as given facts."

In developing the concept of soundscape, Schafer created a model, which contravenes the signal/noise dichotomy of the engineering sciences and suggests an alternative, all-around listening model, as opposed to the more conventional model of frontal stage- or classroom based listening.

In both authors we find critical attitudes against the prevailing doctrines and authorities of their times. Both express the anti-authoritarian spirit of the 1960s and early 1970s.

## b) Intellectual and scholarly references

Schafer's *The Tuning of the World* and McLuhan's main writings show to a huge extent similar bibliographical references: Harold Innis with his holistic approach to space<sup>8</sup>, the Nobel Prize winner for medicine Georg von Békésy<sup>9</sup>, with his groundbreaking research on the physiology and the concept of hearing, J.C. Carothers with his comparative, trans cultural studies of non-literate and Western mindsets,<sup>10</sup> Edmund Carpenter with his research on Eskimo-culture,<sup>11</sup> Lewis Mumford and his techno-cultural approach,<sup>12</sup> Siegfried Giedion, a historian and critic of architecture, just to name the most obvious ones.

Both, Schafer and McLuhan, share Gestalt theory with its figure and ground axioms, as important background for their theories: both come with a clear philological background building their theories and its exemplifications on an immense knowledge of literature.<sup>13</sup>

## c) Common terminologies and approaches

Notable is both thinkers' clearly historical approach: Schafer in

*The Tuning of the World* starting in mythological times, tracing soundscapes and auditory cultures up to the present; McLuhan exploring the rise and fall of aural and oral culture beginning with the ancient Greeks.<sup>14</sup>

Evident is their enlightenment critical position, as is their self-understanding as "artist as theorist – theorist as artist"<sup>15</sup>, merging scholarly discourse with imagination, speculation, and aesthetization of their respective positions, coming however, from opposite directions: McLuhan coming from scholarly discourse, Schafer from composition, painting and pedagogy.

Two remarkable similarities in terminology refer to McLuhan's, the predecessor's, coining influence: his famous "Global Village",<sup>16</sup> quite a fashionable buzzword from the 1970s on, is very likely to have inspired Schafer's term "Global Composition". Whereas McLuhan's term stands for the electric media's worldwide instantaneous communication and the simultaneous presence and communication of individuals, the "Global Composition" imagines the world as a huge instrument, with a plurality of sounds taking place at the same time, produced by the living inhabitants. The metaphor of "globality" stands for both authors' central concepts of non-linearity and simultaneity.

The second similarity becomes obvious in the use of the word element "schizo". McLuhan stated that "Schizophrenia may be a necessary consequence of literacy",<sup>17</sup> attesting schizophrenia to the whole of the occidental culture, as "phonetic writing split apart thought and action", and passion from intellect.<sup>18</sup> With the term "schizophonia"<sup>19</sup> Schafer describes the potential perceptual irritation for listeners in the face of mediated sound split off from its source: only with the invention of the phonograph the sound of an event or a living being could gain an existence independent from its physical origin.

Both authors view the dominant technologies and their economic circumstances as a condition that determines the level of people's perceptual abilities within a specific society: noticeable are only those perceptual impressions, which are "allowed" for by the technologies, their economy and related structures. It would require a huge effort, in fact, a strong socio critical stance, in order to prevent our well-functioning senses, their abilities and practices, from finally getting reduced or even abandoned by virtue of techno-socio-political conditions.

## 3. Listening

### a) Critique of the visual

When it comes to characterizing the contemporary order of the senses, both authors' critique of the visual plays a central role. McLuhan often refers to the "visual stress" of the present culture, and both talk of a visual bias or a visual dominance in Western societies mainly.

However, their critique of the visual is often misinterpreted. It is not a denigration of the visual as such and as a result is not caused by any anti-sensual impetus – neither by Schafer nor by McLuhan – but it is a critique of the system behind the visual.

In *The Tuning of the World* Schafer builds on McLuhan's elaborations – already widely discussed in the 1960s – that the

5 McLuhan, Herbert Marshall, *Playboy Magazine* (March 1969), at: <http://www.digitallanteamcluhan/mcluhanplayboy.htm> (08.12.2011), without pagination.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 cf Cavell, Richard, *McLuhan in Space. A Cultural Geography*, Toronto 2002, p. 20.

9 "for his discoveries of the physical mechanism of stimulation within the cochlea"

10 Carothers, John Colin, "Culture, Psychiatry and the Written Word", in: *Psychiatry*, November 1959, p. 308.

11 Carpenter, Edmund, *Eskimo*, Toronto 1959.

12 Mumford, Lewis, *Technics and Civilization*, New York 1934.

13 McLuhan predominantly based in the literature of the Elizabethan age, Schafer in the Romantic period.

14 especially in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan (1962).

15 cf Cavell on McLuhan: "McLuhan situated his work between critical and artistic discursive system", in: *Cavell*, *ibid.*, p. XIV.

16 "...space has vanished. We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening" (McLuhan 1967, p. 63)

17 McLuhan (1962), p. 22.

18 *ibid.*

19 R. M. Schafer, *The New Soundscape*, Toronto, 1969, pp. 43–47.

dominance of visual perceptual habits had originated in Gutenberg's technology of movable typescript and was fortified by the Renaissance and its visual inventions (be it the telescope, the picture-frame stage – *Guckkastenbühne*- and perspective)<sup>20</sup>. For McLuhan this visual dominance corresponds to society's basic principles of homogeneity, linearity and repeatability, of frontal perception and the distancing towards the object of perception. It became fundamental for the development of Enlightenment, the sciences and Western economy, universalizing characteristic structures of print technology by applying them to all aspects of life.

Schafer doesn't follow McLuhan's structural argumentation openly. However, he uses it as a subtext. He explains the visual bias as an expression of industrialization but also of economization, rationalism, consumerism and commodification<sup>21</sup>. It is here where the starting point for his ecological approach is located.

According to McLuhan the ongoing visual bias results from a fundamental misunderstanding of contemporary electric media and its potentials. As a result it has to be terminated and replaced by what McLuhan called the "audile-tactile complex", leading to a better understanding and mastering of contemporary media. For Schafer, however, it is more important to gain a different relationship to the world by apprehending its auditory aspects and not relying predominantly on its visual appearance.

Both emphasize the importance of all senses being interrelated, not replacing one bias with another. They envision that an end to the underrating of the listening sense would lead to an explicit appreciation of the tactile dimension, "the interplay of the senses"<sup>22</sup> and of the physical body.

## b) The marginalization of the auditory sense

Before the invention of the phonetic alphabet, man lived in a world where all the senses were balanced and simultaneous, a closed world of tribal depth and resonance, an oral culture structured by a dominant auditory sense of life.<sup>23</sup>

Many would ascribe this quote to Schafer, but it is by McLuhan, and gives an idea about their similarity. Throughout his writings McLuhan describes the *violent lopsided stimulus* (1960)<sup>24</sup> of linear visuality, which created a closed system, frozen and blocked, numbed against other stimuli, mainly the auditory one. McLuhan named this effect "Narcissus Narcosis", following the Greek myth of Narcissus, who got addicted to image (not being aware that it is his own), and despised what was audible.

This bias, based on the inherited Gutenberg-coined culture, could however change. Thus McLuhan's optimistic assessment: he predicted that the electronic age and the simultaneity of its global village would return humans to the audile-tactile realm. Murray Schafer sympathizes with this idea in his preface to *The Tuning of the World*<sup>25</sup>, however does not share his optimism in regard to electronic media.

In the everyday life of industrialized nations, the sonic environment, he states, is often ugly, random and stressful, and besides lacking aesthetics, it rarely carries significance. Therefore, being hard of hearing may seem to be quite an efficient survival strategy.

But instead, while McLuhan trusted electronic media for reinstating listening and an integration of the senses, Schafer developed his pedagogical concept of *Ear Cleaning* (Toronto 1967). It centers on creating critical awareness of the sonic environment in which listeners live, with the aim of bringing to their consciousness those sounds, they usually ignore. Ideally this would lead to an overall appreciation of listening as such and encourage a critical listening stance toward the environment, which in turn would enable inhabitants to claim improvements in their soundscapes. – To re-instate listening, Schafer does not trust the media's historical development, but does trust the power of creating awareness through pedagogy and enlightenment, leading to action and change.

## c) The "field approach"

In *Understanding Media* (1964) McLuhan explains his famous sentence "The medium is the message."<sup>26</sup> It is not the medium's content, which conveys communication, but the medium as such understood as a "field". McLuhan calls this also a "mosaic approach"<sup>27</sup>: his focus is not on partial aspects of the medium, but he understands it as an entity of configuration and dynamic relationships.

According to E. H. Gombrich this field approach is rooted in Cubism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

[C]ubism sets up an interplay of planes and contradiction or dramatic conflict of patterns, lights, textures, [...] drops the illusion of perspective in favor of instant sensory awareness of the whole.<sup>28</sup>

It is this "instant total awareness"<sup>29</sup> which suspends sequentiality and linearity, making such "field" approach plausible.

The medium, so stated McLuhan, is not a conveyor of society's interests and values. But reversely, attitudes and values emanate from the medium, as its respective structure would allow them to come into effect. Around 1968, this must have sounded quite strange, as in Marxist discourse, the liberating or oppressive effect of a medium was assumed to be generated by the content, influencing the recipients' opinions.

What is the connection to Schafer here? With his soundscape model, Schafer turns away from a selective attitude of eavesdropping (listening to a certain content or signal, and ignoring others), but wants to foster an evenly suspended attention to any sound. This "mosaic approach" to the auditory world favours an overall auditory awareness: all at once – nothing should be ignored. Not what you listen to is of main interest, but how you listen. The listening attitude of the soundscape listener when practiced in everyday life will certainly bring the recipient's perception into a different order. This will lead to a different relationship towards the phenomena of the world, and will result in a different hierarchy of values, as it alters the utilitarian perceptual habits of everyday life. These are closely interrelated – as Schafer describes throughout his book – with the predominance of the visual culture, and – as McLuhan made aware and Schafer implicitly confirms – its cultivation of rationalization, sequentiality and linearity.

## 4. Environment

McLuhan's "field approach" leads directly to the idea of "environment", which both – Schafer and McLuhan – share. In the preface to *The Gutenberg Galaxy* McLuhan mentions early, that instead of the term "galaxy" he could have equally used the term "environment".

20 Schafer, R. Murray, *The Tuning of the World*, Toronto 1977. p. 10

21 *ibid.* p. 212, Schafer exemplifies this thought here by pointing to farmland real estate business and tourism.

22 McLuhan (1962), p. 65.

23 McLuhan (1969).

24 literally from: [http://learningspaces.org/n/files/mcluhan\\_educating\\_senses.pdf](http://learningspaces.org/n/files/mcluhan_educating_senses.pdf) (08.12.2011). McLuhan, Herbert Marshall, „Report on Project in Understanding New Media“. (National Association of Educational Broadcasters 1960).

25 Schafer (1977), p. 11.

26 McLuhan (1964), p. 25.

27 McLuhan (1962), p. 0. (Preface – without specifying headline – directly before "Prologue", no pagination).

28 McLuhan (1964), p. 25.

29 *ibid.*

## a) The environmental Gestalt

By establishing the term “environment” McLuhan had obtained a new concept. For him, an environment is technology based: this means, based on script, papyrus, wheel, electricity, etc. which all led – after their respective invention and propagation – to fundamental environmental changes.<sup>30</sup> He conceived of environments not as “passive containers”, but as “active processes that reshape people and other (older) technologies alike”,<sup>31</sup> constantly reconfiguring their elements, and involving their recipients as environments’ interactive parts.

Schafer’s central term soundscape<sup>32</sup> is characterized by the same dynamics. It derives from landscape and suggests first of all soundscape as an acoustic representation of a visual appearance. However, the term implies much more: Schafer introduced it to emphasize, that our auditory experience of the world cannot rely on the attitude of selecting the assumed signal and ignoring the rest of the present sounds as noise. It is the entirety (*Gesamtheit*) of sounds, which constitutes the identity of a place, space or situation, and makes up a soundscape.

“Soundscape” shifts the time-based notion of sound to a spatial notion, without neglecting its time factor. Instead of segmentation and sequentiality he established an “all-in-one” and an “all-at-once.” This complies with McLuhan’s field approach. And it was Barry Truax’ *Acoustic Communication* (2001) which brought Schafer’s implicit assumption to the surface of soundscape being a process and a dynamic entity: that its three basic elements, “listener”, “sound”, and “environment” are in a constant process of re-adjusting to each other, continuously shifting their relationships to each other. Through this, the similarity to McLuhan’s environmental paradigm, stated in the early 1960s, becomes obvious.

An agitated, interactive and participatory “all-in-one” and an “all-at-once”, this is the environmental Gestalt McLuhan established and Schafer concretized. The awareness that this environmental concept creates, transgresses the borders of a mere cognitive model and paves the way for what McLuhan called the idea of “environment as artwork”: “[...] designed to maximize perception.”<sup>33</sup> At the time however, he was not able to exemplify concretely what this might be<sup>34</sup>. But examples for similarly novel artistic endeavours, such as installation art<sup>35</sup> or the sound environment became numerous.

## b) The novel space concept of acoustic space

“You can’t have a point of view in the electric world!” exclaimed McLuhan in a TV-interview 1967, “You have to be in everything at once, whether you like it or not. You have to be participating in

30 McLuhan (1962), p. 0 (Preface – without specifying headline – directly before “Prologue”, no pagination).

31 McLuhan (1962), p. 0. See also: “Environments are not passive wrappings, but are rather, active processes which are invisible. The ground rules, pervasive structures, and over-all patterns of environments elude easy perception.” McLuhan, Herbert Marshall, Fiore, Quentin, *The Medium is the Massage*. New York 1967, p. 68.

32 Schafer coined the term, however the word first appeared in 1969 in an urban study by the young US-American architect Michael Southworth, who used it for sounds and noises unfolding and – literally – taking place in urban spaces.

33 McLuhan/Fiore (1967), p. 68.

34 <http://darin.rtgit.com/2011/08/marshall-mcluhan-environment-art.html> (08.11.2011) “We have now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art, as a teaching machine designed to maximize perception and to make everyday learning a process of discovery. Application of this knowledge would be the equivalent of a thermostat controlling room temperature. It would seem only reasonable to extend such controls to all the sensory thresholds of our being. We have no reason to be grateful to those who juggle these thresholds in the name of haphazard innovation.” McLuhan/Fiore (1967), p. 68.

“The ear world is a world of simultaneous relationships.” *ibid.* pp. 110/111.

35 Allan Kaprow used the term “Environment” in 1958 to describe his indoor installations.

everything going on at the same time.”<sup>36</sup> In order to substantiate this figure of thought, with which he explained the new effects of electronic media, McLuhan had been researching for its existence since the 1950s. He found it in the concept of acoustic space.<sup>37</sup> Acoustic space, not to be confused with the Engineering Science’s notion of spatial acoustics, is for McLuhan the concept of a space that is not enclosed, and therefore not to be defined visually. The Vancouver-based McLuhan researcher Richard Cavell impressively describes how agonizing McLuhan’s struggle to find a space concept was – a concept which definitely does not follow naively the linear and sequential perceptual habits of the visual culture, but allows for the experience of perceiving different impressions simultaneously. Not earlier than 1967, McLuhan stated clearly: “The ear world is a world of simultaneous relationships.”<sup>38</sup>

At that time, the term soundscape had not yet been born. It did not become popular before the end of the 1960s.<sup>39</sup> It is the term soundscape as coined by Schafer which meets McLuhan’s requirements for this new, and moreover alternative, space concept: simultaneity, all-at-once, the interactive dynamics of the soundscape’s elements, as well as the impossibility of a fixed “point of view”.

From the musicological point of view, the term soundscape realizes a “field approach” to sound – in the late 1960s a very unorthodox idea. The famous aphorism “The medium is the message”, corresponds perfectly with the notion of soundscape configuring the senses, recipients, contents as well as perceptual and communicational behaviour towards a holistic and inseparable entity. With the notion of soundscape, Schafer completed McLuhan’s idea of space and unfolded it – still stuck between visual and auditory thinking – fully. As the listener is an active element in a soundscape, the process of listening can be considered a systemic one, which is precisely how perception, is generally understood by McLuhan.

It needs to be mentioned at this point, that both contemporaries never relate in their major writings to new phenomena developing in the artistic world, although the avantgarde at this time delivers excellent and plentiful examples for new space concepts and the environmental figure of thought. John Cage clearly represents a field approach to music, starting with his spectacular performance “4’33” in the early 1950s. Allan Kaprow with his “*Environments*” which definitely were the immediate start off point for installation art coming up during the 1960s, not to mention the new genre of sound installation (the first ones by Max Neuhaus or Maryanne Amacher in 1968) or network based performances (by Cage in the early 1950s, and by Stockhausen in 1968 for example).

Even if not all of these artists have consciously adopted McLuhan’s and Schafer’s idea, the latter have definitely shaped the discourse and thereby created a milieu – one could again say, an environment – in which sonic, visual and tactile experiences based on new notions of space became organized in a novel way.

## 5. Ecology

### a) McLuhan’s structural term

Although McLuhan rarely used the term ecology, it emerged as one of his central ideas, describing his overall methodology. His endeavour to understand media as systems and environments was motivated by regaining control over them, which he considered a matter of survival<sup>40</sup> – a survival in the sense of being able to master

36 in his interview Marshall McLuhan: “The World is Show Business” (1967), at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9P8gUNAVSt8> (08.12.2011)

37 Cavell, p. 20

38 McLuhan/Fiore (1967), pp. 110/111

39 with the book: R. Murray Schafer, *The New Soundscape*, Toronto 1969.

40 McLuhan (1969).

electronic medias' effects on psyche and intellect, and retain the individual's freedom of wishing, acting and perceiving. „We shape our tools, and then the tools shape us“, is a famous and critical quote for underlining McLuhan's ecological substance. It is based on his central thought that each sense or faculty which is extended technologically or stimulated excessively, „leads to the 'closure' or equilibrium-seeking among the other senses“<sup>41</sup>, and to the Narcissus, the denial of the audile-tactile, mentioned earlier.

McLuhan is considered the godfather of „media ecology“. Scholars like Neil Postman, Lance Strate or Christine Nyström sharpened this approach to media theory from the late 60s on. In 1971, Postman founded the program „Media Ecology“ at New York University (NYU), which attracted worldwide attention. The ecological notion which some of McLuhan's successors carved out of his writings successfully<sup>42</sup> is not a biological one, dealing with natural resources, pollution and sustainability, but a structural one, applying the term ecology in a metaphorical sense, but also considering its systemic methodology (as coined by Ernst Haeckel in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the sense of „oikos“ – „household“). A societal system is the result of interdependencies between technology, order of the senses and specific practices and phenomena.



R. Murray Schafer teaching a song to the group on the last day of the WFAE 2011 conference in Corfu.

### b) Schafer's hybrid term

Rooted in a systemic ecological approach similar to McLuhan's, Schafer unfolded his argumentation, that efficiency, mobility and consumption – a superabundance of sounds which came into existence through the Electric Revolution – create a multitude of uncontrolled auditory presences, resulting in chaos, ugliness and mental overload: physical and psychological blockages in hearing perception (*Schwerhörigkeit*)– or as McLuhan put it, closure of the auditory sense – a survival strategy.

Beyond that, Schafer related the growing inability and unwillingness to listen to a biologically oriented understanding of sustainability: to a concept of ecology which emerged in North America in the early 1960s, and became more and more popular until the mid-1970s.<sup>43</sup> For Schafer's theory it means: environmental pollution decreases the diversity and specificity of sounds all over the world, a growing uniformity, a leveling of the multitude of sounds in everyday life, of the acoustic identity of spaces, places and situa-

tions, and as a result making sound as a medium of communication insignificant. Ecological imbalances will result in a loss of auditory aesthetics and therefore in a loss of awareness, auditory sensitivity and listening culture.

Schafer applies ecology's systemic as well as biological implication, and takes it further with the current course of time, into the practical political realm. His acoustic ecology implies a clear opinion on the morality and hierarchy of values in the age of commodification, an aspect of ecology, which became relevant at the same time for Neil Postman's Media Ecology.

## 6. Contrasts

### a) Engagement vs observation

„I ceased being a moralist and became a student.“<sup>44</sup> A moral attitude was clearly rejected by McLuhan, as it would inhibit him to learn about the functioning of the change he described. Although he conceded, he was not enjoying the development of media he described he always defined himself publicly as an observer with a neutral scientific attitude. Moreover, he was convinced, although often criticized for this, that operationally, he had nothing to contribute to change the situation, but simply to provide analysis and understanding of the media.

Schafer was most probably the first one who formulated and elaborated on the idea of changing an unsatisfactory soundscape, and designing it sonically. Although listening (which corresponds to observing) inevitably is the basic pre-requisite before design, he finally calls for operational practice and change, by formulating guiding values and criteria. His definitive position is obvious, and so are his intent and his mission. With such engagement, he is transgressing the systemic concept of ecology considerably.

### b) Nature and technologization

McLuhan, in describing media and technologies as „extensions“ of the body, emphasizes its welcome potential of also extending human capacities and faculties.

Schafer does not share this attitude that technology is enriching. By the time of the Electric Revolution in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he sees the essence of sound changed from being an immaterial, singular and volatile entity into becoming materially objectified, easily copied and manipulated. His special concern is directed to the fact, that audio-media technology can multiply and amplify sound up to a volume, which causes physical damage to the human ear. Instead of perceiving them as value neutral „extensions“, he considers such technologies as controlling and inauthentic, taking on a life of their own, suppressing possibilities instead of extending them, exerting power beyond human measure – an extension which disfigures human autonomy as it alienates from the physically or naturally given capacities.

In McLuhan's theory, the concept of primeval nature as an a priori cannot be found. Since the early days of mankind, every technology became an extension of the body, stepping into a system of interrelations and configurations with the environment, be it in balance or bias, not leaving the human being in a state of origin or purity.

## 7. Conclusion

So, what can be shown by reading Schafer, through the ideas of McLuhan and vice versa? To position Schafer and acoustic ecology in relation to the broader frame of McLuhan's model and to the ongoing discourse in media and perception during the 1960s and 1970s shows the intellectual-creative milieu and its pre-requisites in which an environmental and ecological approach to media and sensual

41 McLuhan (1964), p. 66.

42 „We cannot get out through linear logic and cause-and-effect thinking alone. We need to work dialectically and ecologically, riding through complex systems on the edge of chaos.“ This quote by Lance Strate sums up this position in: Strate, Lance, „Studying Media as Media: McLuhan and the Media Ecology Approach“, *MediaTropes eJournal* Vol I (2008): 127–142, p. 137.

43 In Europe, this conceptual specification of ecology started 10 years later.

44 McLuhan (1969).

perception could happen. Reading McLuhan through Schafer, shows in which aspects Schafer was able to complete McLuhan's ideas, as for example with the term soundscape and with driving McLuhan's paradigms further towards an operational concept of ecology – an achievement which McLuhan obviously appreciated, otherwise nothing would explain the praise on the banner in the "Coach House".

"...since we exist as conversation, listening to each other...". From the beginning, the quote by Friedrich Hölderlin has wanted to remind of this essay's wider context: understanding McLuhan's "environment" and Schafer's soundscape as closely related systemic concepts, based on paradigms not conforming with linear-causal approaches and inherited dialectical cognition. The philosophical traces of these "all around" concepts lead to Martin Heidegger: Heidegger's thought of "In-Sein" – "being in", "being inside": inside a system or an environment – implies, that a separation between a human being and the sphere in which he/she is existing, is not possible. The individual or the society exists amalgamated with its surroundings, which makes – according to Heidegger – object and subject, perceiving and creating the phenomena to be perceived, inseparable. An environment, be it natural or technological, can be conceived as figure of thought, the sonic environment (the soundscape) especially as existential concept: being a listening part of the auditory world as well as an auditory part of the listening world.

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