

SOUND IN THE MACHINE

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A Tourist in the Soundscape

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SUMMARY

"We've got words like . . . *bang, boom, crack, patter, clack, squawk*, and *whack* that kind of make the sound we want to talk about, "noise, pitch, loudness, ringing, and consonance" to describe a sound, but we don't really have a word that acknowledges that the phenomenon of sound is constant."

In episode two, I talk about "the Soundscape." This is an idea defined by Murray Schafer as "any acoustic field of study...[consisting of] events heard not objects seen." But it is also "an indicator of social conditions which produce [the sound] and...the trending and evolution of...society."

Like the things around us we see and look at, the Soundscape is what we hear and listen to. In this episode, I outline many of the concepts that go along with the Soundscape and urge my audience to give the world another listen, to become 'A Tourist in the Soundscape.'

TEXT WORKS CITED

Oleksik, Gerard, David Frohlich, Lrona M. Brown, and Abigail Sellen. "Sonic Interventions: Understanding and Extending the Domestic Soundscape." CHI 2008 Proceedings, April 5-10, Florence, Italy.

Schafer, R. Murray. The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World. Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1977.

Wrightson, Kendall. "An Introduction to Acoustic Ecology."
<<http://homepage.mac.com/kendallwrightson/ae/aecology.html>>.

SOUND SOURCES AND DESCRIPTION

- Snead, Brian. Various Times of Day in My Living Room. Atlanta: 2008.
 - A splice of several different types of sound in my living room on a Saturday.

SOUND IN THE MACHINE

A Tourist in the Soundscape



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By Brian Snead

TRANSCRIPT

The front door. A key in the lock. You step out. The streets, the beach, the park, the parking deck. Your sandals, your sneakers, your hard soles. Coming storm, light breeze, drizzle. Birds in the trees, over the water. Traffic. In your car. Shifting on the tram. Standing on the bus. Doors swing open. Crowds and empty spaces. Your foot hits the ground. Shops close up. Cell phones. Cash registers. An indigent on the corner.

A key in the lock. The door opens. Closes. You kick off your shoes. Neighbors at it again. Bare feet. Socked feet. Slippers. Television, radio, podcast. Coffee from the pot. Rain through the screen door. Fan on high, AC unit through the window. Your ear scraping against the pillow case. Blood pumping through your head.

The Soundscape. Like the things around us we see and look at, the soundscape is what we hear and listen to. The soundscape is a straight-forward enough idea, but, in a way, that hides its complexity. Mainly, we're rarely aware that there's any such thing as a soundscape. A second ago, I reeled off some phrases hoping it may bring some sounds to your mind. For me, as I think through this stuff, images pop up rather easily; recalling how sound would fit in takes the work of a few more synapses. We default to our eyes, not our ears, imagining the world is seeing it with our eyes closed. Nothing wrong with that, I suppose. There's much to see. But there's a lot to hear too.

So the title I have chosen for this episode goes along with the idea that there's a lot of delightful and strange things to hear when we open up our ears. Honestly, I stole 'a tourist in the soundscape' from a fella named Murray Schafer. Schafer uses it in a more literal sense, writing that "the ear is always much more alert while traveling in unfamiliar environments" (211). This is a fantastic idea but one I wouldn't limit to foreign environments. Just by listening up to the sounds around us and in us, we tour an unfamiliar place. We have to force ourselves to reconsider what we have accepted as our soundscape to experience what else may be there. Detach yourself from the functioning environment and you perceive it as an object of curiosity and aesthetic enjoyment (212), as Schafer would say. In other words, there is sound everywhere but, *have you really ever listened, like, for no other reason but to think about it, to hear it, to analyze its meaning in your life?*

So, the soundscape. We could probably give it two names: 1. the soundscape or 2. the thing that is the auditory equivalent of landscape, horizon, setting, vista, view, seascape, scope, panorama, scenery, scene, background. I try to keep this podcast short and snappy and Schafer's editor was no doubt sensitive about the cost of printing back in the day so let's just stick with the soundscape and marvel at the fact that we've got tons of words like "noise, pitch, loudness, ringing, and consonance" to describe a sound and words like "bang, boom, crack, patter, clack, squawk, and whack" that kind of make the sound we want to talk about. But we don't really have a word that acknowledges that the phenomenon of sound is constant.

And it's not just a word thing: most of us don't listen to our soundscape. We hear it, to some extent, but we don't listen to it. Contemplation and aesthetic enjoyment is one thing. Schafer finds that the lack of awareness of sound leads and contributes to negative things in society. On its surface, the soundscape is a very simple idea. It's "any acoustic field of study...[consisting of] events *heard* not objects *seen*" (7-8). For Schafer, not only does the soundscape of a community contain "rich symbolism" for humanity, but is an "indicator of social conditions which produce [the sound] and...the trending and evolution of that society" (5-7). The most obvious example is what has been termed "noise pollution." However, I'll be skipping the heavy dose of "social indications" for now and will get back to it in a subsequent episode.

I want to tell you a bit about Murray Schafer and the organization he started called 'The World Soundscape Project.' At the time he came up with the idea of the soundscape in the 60s, he was a professor of Communication Studies at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. But "professor of Communication Studies" is misleading in Schafer's case. Also known as "Canada's pre-eminent composer," Schafer is an educator, environmentalist, literary scholar, visual artist and provocateur. He's a serious academic and a big thinker. Most of all, he has a knack that I admire: as an autodidact, he tends to follow on his own terms his quirky intellectual interests, which for him are: music, literature, philosophy, and journalism. Not too shabby. He also earned himself the title "father of acoustic ecology." If you "father" an 'ology,' I'm impressed.

In the 70s, Schafer founded the World Soundscape Project to capture and perform for the world what he believed it was destroying. Consisting of Schafer and several students at Simon Fraser University, the World Soundscape Project recorded and studied the acoustic environments of Vancouver, other places in Canada, and five villages in Sweden, Germany, Italy, France, and Scotland. The project garnered great interest worldwide and ultimately created an international multidiscipline, which is now being carried on by the society that grew out of the World Soundscape Project, the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology.

But now let's get back to the soundscape and into its basic mechanics. As I said, a soundscape is 'any acoustic field of study.' Thinking of the soundscape is considering the things happening in the world that make sound. A soundscape, then, can really be just about anything. Soundscape of Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, of Japan's Tsukiji Fish Market, of Arlington National Cemetery, or the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. There are soundscapes associated with the natural environment— Elks bugling in the rut, the howl of the gray wolf, the Amazonian rainforest, the Venado Caves of Costa Rica, your backyard, even. A soundscape could be a hospital, a house, an apartment (see Oleksik et al.), or a bunker. Almost anything qualifies. Since the Soundscape is about sound, and sound is produced by things happening, the soundscape is about events and the way they interact (131). To sum it up in two words: events heard, that's the key.

To begin some sort of classification of sound within the soundscape, Schafer gives a tip of the hat to visual art. He establishes a figure to ground relationship. In a painting, for example,

the ground is, say, an idealized landscape with trees and sunlight and glistening rivers. The figure is the very plump, pasty woman reclining on a sofa. Schafer calls what would be the ground in visual paradigms, 'keynote sounds' in the soundscape. Keynote sounds are just sounds heard continuously or frequently (272). Examples could be the sound of the sea for a seaside community or the sounds of trains, busses, and planes in the modern city. The term keynote, just so you know, is intentionally musical. This is because Schafer, "Canada's pre-eminent composer," if you recall, thinks of all sound as a massive composition: "behold, the new orchestra: the sonic universe!" (5). Anyway, keynote is the ground. You hear it, but not really. Its just there. The sound which goes on top of it, as it were, is referred to as signal. In the painting from a second ago, this signal would be called "figure," ya know, the pasty lady on the couch? As opposed to keynote sounds, which are not always noticed, "signals...are listened to consciously" (10). Just to warm you up on this idea, think of bells, whistles, horns and sirens (10) as examples of signals.

After keynote and signal comes "soundmarks." Soundmarks, analogous to landmarks, are sounds unique to a particular community (274). Natural soundmarks include all kinds of things. Schaffer writes of how taken he was taken with the "strange underground rumblings and gurglings" (26) of the great fields of boiling sulphur at Hell's Gate, New Zealand. I had a similar experience a few years ago on the beach of Nice, France hearing the sound of the waves as they drew back out into the Mediterranean over the beach full of pebbles. It was such a unique (and unexpected) sound that I will always associate it with Nice. You can also think of Niagara Falls, Old Faithfull in Yellowstone, or the calving of Perito Moreno glacier in Argentina as examples of natural soundmarks. The other type of soundmark is that which is produced by human communities. The most ubiquitous examples are bells. Just about everyone has a memory of Sunday morning church bells racking their sleep. Other folks travel thousands of miles just to hear bells like London's Big Ben, the Salvatore Mundi of Salzburg, or those of Notre Dame. Waking to the sound of bells may be difficult enough; image waking to cannon fire. There is a canon fired over the harbor in the evening in Vancouver. At Edinburgh Castle a gun fires at precisely one o'clock everyday. You could also think of the 'funerals with music' in New Orleans, Carnival the world over, parades, or any other public demonstrations and gatherings as soundmarks. And soundmarks are not just in other places; there is bound to be something where you live, some event maybe, that makes a unique sound. Think on it for a few minutes and you are bound to come up with something.

Where I live, the most significant feature is the street traffic. No doubt you have heard the sounds other than my voice playing on this podcast. Well, that's the sound of my living room at different times of a Saturday and, as you can hear, it's full of traffic. Day and night, weekend or holiday, thousands of automobiles of all types pass by my living room door on the street below. The traffic is definitely the keynote, but it also functions as the soundmark of just about any American city. In addition to the traffic, acorns fall on the aluminum awning over the front door regularly. That's a signal that's really started to become a soundmark. Up until a few weeks ago there was the constant rattle and hum of road crews digging up what they dug up the month before and the month before that. That's a city-soundmark and a living room keynote I'm glad to be rid of. Just so my soundscape doesn't sound so glum, I also have the sounds of dogs next door and squirrels running in the leaves, people walking by and talking, and the voices of kids on the playground. Plenty of other sounds too. But, unfortunately I return to the fact that the keynote of my living room is the traffic. I would like to say that I appreciate it in some way but, as the 8,000th car passes by, its old hat. So I tend to side with Schafer's rather negative attitude towards anything man-made.

So that he can get out what really bugs him, the man-made sounds, Schafer builds an elaborate theory of sound types. The most simple distinction, to start off with, is the dichotomy he constructs between basically 'natural' and 'man-made' soundscapes. But he doesn't call them that. Instead, he terms them hi- and lo-fi environments. A hi-fi environment is a place where you can hear sounds clearly and where not a lot of sounds overlap (272). It's basically pleasing with sounds coming and going slowly and none so loud or unchanging that they become obnoxious or numbing. A lo-fi environment, on the other hand, is basically the opposite, where "signals are overcrowded...[and] lack ...clarity" (272). Think of the ongoing construction colossus that is Dubai or a machining factory or a pit at the Indy 500. Every sound is so loud and so similar to the next sound that they bleed all over each other resulting in a veritable cacophony. These lo-fi environments are those which most concern Schafer, as he believes that they will overtake the hi-fi soundscape, drowning out every thing beautiful and / or interesting in the soundscape. I hear the traffic as I write this and wonder at all the things I could be hearing were they not covered up by this. But what do I expect? It's a city, for crying out loud. Ya know, destroy a natural habitat and the natural soundscape disappears with it. That's one part of the lo-fi reality. Another is that urban life then becomes

so saturated with loud industrial sounds that all we want to do is shut them out. And the worst thing about sound is that it is so difficult to shut out. So we try to ignore it. But whatever we can't ignore, we try to cover up. Independent scholar Kendall Wrightson sums it up this way:

Sound becomes something that the individual tries to block, rather than to hear; the lo-fi, low information soundscape has nothing to offer. As a result, many individuals try to shut it out...with acoustic perfume—music. Music—the virtual soundscape—is, in this context, used as a means to control the sonic environment rather than as a natural expression of it... [It turns] the sonic environment into a commodity.

Wrightson 12

Music as a commodity to cover up the lo-fi, low information soundscape. Yeah, I'm buyin' that. Crank that stereo up, man. Unless I'm feeling particularly scholarly, I've got some trashy old rock album loud enough to drown out the junk I don't want to hear most of the day.

And using music like this obviously contributes to the problem. It also becomes a habit, even when we are in hi-fi soundscapes. Its two extremes of shutting out sounds we don't like and not knowing what to listen for when in hi-fi soundscapes. There is also a middle ground. Hi or lo-fi, we've gotta first learn to listen to the sounds around us, not merely react to them or try to shut them out. The first and most important component is to learn to respect silence.

Here's a Schafer-approved scenario, something he would call a "listening walk" (212). Take yourself outside without the iPod. Try to suspend a lot of heavy thinking. Just relax and take a stroll. Just as you would scan a landscape with your eyes, scan it with your ears. Really let those sounds settle in on you. Take 20 minutes or so. Somewhere in that time, pick out a sound that seems interesting or unique (272). Think over its characteristics. Does it have some kind of texture, does its pitch move around, does it stop and start or is it continuous? Then find say, 5 sounds. Find 5 you like and 5 you don't like. Listen to your footsteps. Listen to other people's footsteps. Hear the streets, the beach, the park, the parking deck, the coming storm, drizzle, birds in the trees, traffic...

Take Schafer's mantra while you're at it, that the "soundscape of the world is a huge musical composition, unfolding around us ceaselessly" (Schafer 205). Check it out and see what you think. Separate yourself out from having to function in the soundscape, experience it and reflect on it. You may find that you've managed to enter a disturbing and delightful place that you never really knew was there.

Works Cited

Oleksik, Gerard, David Frohlich, Lrona M. Brown, and Abigail Sellen. "Sonic Interventions: Understanding and Extending the Domestic Soundscape." CHI 2008 Proceedings, April 5-10, Florence, Italy.

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