

# RELOCATING THE EAR: A CROSS-CULTURAL EXPLORATION OF THE ELECTRIFIED SOUNDSCAPE

Vincent Andrisani

School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Dr., British Columbia, V5A 1S6. Email: [vincent\\_andrisani@sfu.ca](mailto:vincent_andrisani@sfu.ca)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the twentieth century, the relationship between the individual and their social environment experienced a profound communicative transformation. The 'acoustic community', regarded as a collection of unique local sounds and their rhythmic interplay (Schafer 1994; World Soundscape Project 1977), has now become characterized by an aura of homogenization (Truax 2008). Both the increased interpersonal reliance upon electroacoustic forms of communication, as well as that which has come at the hands of capitalist discourse (as in the use of Muzak), continues to suppress and mask acoustic attributes that were once definitive of local culture. Simultaneously, we have experienced a shift in the ability of the listener, evidenced by the declining aptitude for soundscape competence, which is defined as "the ability to understand environmental sound as meaningful" (Truax 2001). Once a functional, and even vital component of the communicative process, it has now largely become a neglected means of environmental exchange. The problem we face today is the manner in which we as listeners negotiate not only the surrogate environment created by neo-orality (Ong 1982), but also our own perceptual detachment, so that we may once again begin to engage and comprehend the nature of the relationship between the individual and the environment.

This exploration examines the attributes of the electrified soundscape, and sets them against a backdrop of cross-cultural approaches to soundmaking and listening. In this context, the engaged aural correspondent can positively employ personal perceptual sensitivities, listening habits, and one's own unique history with sound, in order to renegotiate acoustic space with the ability of soundscape competence.

## 2. NEGOTIATING ACOUSTIC SPACE

The concept of "acoustic space", derived out of the work of Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (1960), makes direct reference to the breadth of spatio-temporal information exhibited by the soundscape. It refers not only to the sound of the environment, but perhaps more significantly, to the manner in which relationships are created or neglected through the use of the aural modality.

There are two periods during which the notion of acoustic space has undergone a pronounced adjustment. The first came as a result of the advent of the phonetic alphabet, where the emphasis on the visual modality encouraged the recalibration of the cognitive and therefore perceptive

framework (Carpenter and McLuhan 1960; Ong 1982, etc.). The second period of adjustment came at the beginning of the twentieth century with the advent of electroacoustic reproduction. The ability to reproduce sound signaled for the first time its removal from an original context, which thus began the spatio-temporal fragmentation of acoustic space – one that continues to intensify with the use of modern media. It must however be noted that the use and availability of modern extensions, and therefore the dominant mode of communication, varies greatly depending on context. Similarly, the cognitive and perceptive bias is also dependent upon context, as it remains a product of cultural construction (Howes 1991). Thus, by employing a comparative method that is at once sociological and anthropological, it opens up a world of possibility through which the social uses of electroacoustic media can be utilized to reconstruct the dynamics of evolutionary change.

## 3. CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACHES

By cross-culturally engaging the framework of acoustic communication and soundscape studies, one is offered the opportunity to assess the similarities and differences of the localized acoustic environment. There are three ways in which this is realized. First, the social and cultural "distance" of the aural correspondent offers the privilege of exploring the soundscape from a unique perspective. From this position, one can locate particular features of the acoustic environment that the process of acoustic habituation would otherwise conceal (Schafer 1994; Vikman 2009). Next, is the need for the acoustic researcher to temper the distance between themselves and the functionality of the soundscape. This implies that they are required to make sense of, and derive meaning from, environmental sound. It is at this point that the notion of soundscape competence is once again activated, so as to work toward a heightened understanding of the soundscape in question. And the final service offered by the comparative approach is the revelation of absences. The aural correspondent with a functional comprehension of the communicative process is inclined toward the discovery of difference through absence. Thus, it is only by way of contrast that the opportunity to understand particular acoustical features as unique to the given context can be ascertained.

## 4. SOCIAL USES OF TECHNOLOGY

Havana, Cuba and Vancouver, Canada offer an example of two distinct environments in which the differences in the social uses of technology are abundant. First, the history of sound in Cuba is one that places a great

deal of communicative significance in the act of music making. This tendency toward acoustical production and reception as a fundamental part of the process of communication is one that extends throughout the continuum of sound, which alongside music also includes speech and the soundscape (Andrisani 2009). Further, the island's political history offers an added twist, where the triumph of the revolution and the economic (and cultural) embargo with the United States has left Cuba in its own "acoustic bubble" – a socio-cultural environment that is largely absent of the technological forms employed in a metropolis such as Vancouver (e.g. the smart phone, the iPod, and the Internet).

Perhaps the most interesting function of a particular technology in Cuba is that of the shortwave radio. In many ways, it serves as an extension of the public address system, whereby the soundscape is altered on account of the dissemination of the ideology of the Cuban government. In this scenario, acoustic space, both public and private, is reconfigured through the use of modern extensions. These modern technologies help to advance and fortify the success of the revolution, and in so doing, they articulate a social and political hierarchy that is notably different than that which is present in Vancouver. Equally interesting is the manner in which radio functioned as a cultural portal for Cuba during the 1970's. It was through this channel that American bands were introduced to island culture, which subverted the political and economic embargo. As a result, the prevailing influence of African-American music on the local musical form can be traced back to the information offered through shortwave radio emanating from Miami. This in turn illustrates the mutual co-dependence of both the extension and the context, where the two are engaged in constant dialogue, balancing the notion of cultural identity on the axle of this relationship.

## 5. CONCLUSION

If identity is always about narrative, and producing in the future an account of the past (Hall 1995), then part of the interest in soundscape studies lies in the fact that sound is the medium through which those stories are told. In a manner that echoes the ephemerality of sound, identity too is dynamic, always in flux. It is, as Simon Frith (1996) describes, "not a thing, but a process", one that is most vividly grasped through sound. And while admittedly the soundscape may not offer the equivalent level of organization as the musical form, it is equally a byproduct of cultural construction. Thus, cross-culturally engaging the soundscape offers more than mere insight into the functionality of the communicative process. Rather, the aural correspondent not only experiences what it means to be part of, and identify with, the culture in question; but in so doing, they can also unearth a new manner through which to identify with the culture to which they belong.

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## AUTHOR NOTE

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