Marvin Heine

RESONANT FABRICS

Listening to Urban Worlds

[transcript] UrbanStudies
Soundscapes profoundly connect listeners to the places they inhabit and thereby reveal the vibrant and resonant fabrics that lie beneath the delineated spaces of visual representation. In *Resonant Fabrics*, Marvin Heine explores and celebrates the many-layered and ambiguously undulating sense- and soundscapes as they shape and are shaped by urban cultures and particular ways of listening. By examining historical documents, contemporary accounts, and original empirical material through a combination of actor-network-theory, ecology, and sound studies scholarship, he embraces, in a stylistically embodied and often poetic manner, the sonic urban world in all its fragile, ephemeral, yet deeply affective sonority.

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1. Introduction: Sound, Sense and Place

Researching the Senses

“The world ceaselessly assails and beleaguers subjectivity as waves wash round a wreck on the shore. All knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty 2002: 240).

Sensuous experiences of being and moving in the city have, for a very long time, been regarded as automatic, purely physical responses to external stimuli. Therefore, sensory perception has been the sole domain of psychology and neurobiology, whereas the social sciences “assumed, rather than assessed” (Borer 2013: 995) the vital function of the senses for us to make sense of the world. Countless impressions, sensations, emotions sweep over us, organize and signify our everyday urban experience. We are attentive to the meanings and references these sensations entail for us, yet, since sensory perceptions are embedded within the very roots of our existence, we take them for granted, are rarely aware of them, don’t question what we sense, even less how we sense – right up until our habits and routines are disrupted, when we are overwhelmed, feel sick or are confronted with a profound misunderstanding and suddenly awake to a reflexive, embodied consciousness of our own sensual experiences: “In other words, the senses give us the world but absent themselves in the process. [...] Perception is, however, a skill, despite the fact it seems to come so naturally” (Howes 2013: 14).
Nevertheless, the still dominant Cartesian conception of space in urban theory, the social science’s tendency for abstraction and objectivity, as well as the methodological difficulty to pinpoint lived experience empirically are only some of the reasons why the sensuous experience of the city remained a marginal topic for sociology and urban research. Only recently, as the latest development of a long chain of paradigmatic evolutions, a new sensitivity for the dynamic and deeply affective relationship between the sensuous world and the experiencing subject emerged, a growing awareness for the

“senses and sensations as the lifeblood of embodied sociality and materiality, as the very tools and techniques allowing for the transaction between human and non-human agents, and the very condition for the carnal experience of self-hood, society, and culture” (Vannini et al. 2012: 15).

But, to begin with, we have to explore what nurtured this blooming ‘sensorial revolution’ (Howes 2013) in the social sciences. If there is a sociology of the senses, it is rooted in the pragmatist works of John Dewey (1934), George Herbert Mead’s philosophy of the act (1938), and Georg Simmel’s classical essays on social aesthetics and the sensuous experiences of city dwellers. In his seminal work ‘The Metropolis and the Mental Life’ (1950), originally published in 1903, Simmel, by directly witnessing the substantial and far-reaching transition from a predominantly rural society towards the modern city – crowded and overwhelming with sensory stimulation – identified a profound change in the ways people sense and interact with their environments and with each other. By arguing that “the real life of society, provided in experience, could certainly not be constructed from those large objectified structures that constitute the traditional objects of social science” (Simmel 1997: 110), he proposes that a sociology of urban experiences should aim “to pursue the meanings that mutual sensory perception and influencing have for the social life of human beings, their coexistence, cooperation, and opposition” (ibid.).

Another stance that strongly influenced contemporary sociological theories and methodologies about the senses can be traced back to the
phenomenological school of thought, in particular to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In his formative work ‘Phenomenology of Perception’ from 1945 (2002), Merleau-Ponty proposes a ‘carnal’ sociology that considers human perception and social existence to be fully embodied processes and that takes seriously the fact that “people are motile, sensate, sensual, suffering, skilled, sedimented, and situated creatures of flesh, blood, nerves, and sinews” (Sparkes 2017: 4). The world as we sense it, therefore, is inseparable from our sensuous experiences thereof: “We must return to the social with which we are in contact by the mere fact of existing, and which we carry about inseparably with us before any objectification” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 421). The following two decades were marked by the ‘linguistic turn’ and the idea that culture, society, and the individual can be regarded as structured like a text, abstracted, deciphered, and generalized. This ‘linguistic turn’ was superseded by the ‘pictorial turn’ as it was coined by William J. Thomas Mitchell (2005) and decisively characterized by the works of Marshall McLuhan (1967). Now the focus changed from a textual analysis of cultural phenomena towards the ways we communicate visually through infinitely reproducible and manipulatable images and to new media forms, such as the television set, and how these act as “extensions of our senses” (McLuhan 2005: 43). As a reaction to the verbocentrism of the ‘linguistic turn’ and the ocularcentrism in the case of the ‘pictorial turn’, the 1990s were characterized by the ‘corporeal turn’ and the ‘material turn’, emphasizing the cultural dimension of embodied experience and the reciprocal influence between the perceiving subject and its surrounding objects, architectures, and environments. With Michael Taussig’s ‘Mimesis and Alterity’ (2018), Anthony Synnott’s ‘The Body Social’ (2002), and Constance Classen’s ‘World of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures’ (1993), all originally published in the year 1993, a new, holistic and relational approach to the senses and human experience has been initiated, eventually legitimizing various forms of non-positivist sociology, such as the sociology of gender, emotions, the body, and in particular the ‘sociology of the senses’.

At the turn of the century, the groundwork for a ‘sensory revolution’ in the social sciences has been laid, and from here on forward, cultures
are considered with regard to their ‘ways of sensing’. A repulsive odor, the disgust caused by a taste, the noisy din of a modern city – but also the aesthetic pleasure derived from the sight and scent of a rose or the specific way a person tenderly touches another – each sensory experience is affected by a larger ‘consensus’, valued and judged alongside the respective cultural patterns of interpretations:

“The ways we use our senses, and the ways we create and understand the sensory world, are shaped by culture. [...] Perception is informed not only by the personal meaning a particular sensation has for us, but also by the social values it carries” (Classen & Howes 2014: 1–4).

Across cultures as well as within a society there are identifiable and often striking variances in the ways certain smells, tastes, textures, or sounds are alloyed, distinguished, judged, and valued.

The human sensorium, hence, is not simply given; it never exists in a natural state. Sensory values reflect social values – sensory hierarchies echo social hierarchies. The senses are, as is the body, not simply given, but are accomplished: “The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present” (Marx 1988: 109). The fundamental hypothesis surrounding ‘sensory research’ implies, therefore, that sensuous perception is, on the one hand, determined by particular sensory regulations, conventions, politics, and values, and, on the other, actively participating in a continuous process of sensory re-appropriation, negotiation, and reassessment.

Sensory studies, as it is finally emerging as a sociological sub-discipline (e.g. Low 2012; Synnott 1993; Vannini et al. 2012), is an inherently inter- and multidisciplinary endeavor, drawing not only on human geography (e.g. Adams & Guy 2007; Porteous 1990; Rodaway 1994), psychology (e.g. Gibson 1983), communication studies (e.g. Bull & Back 2003; Ong 1982; Finneghan 2002), cultural studies (e.g. Geurts 2002) and history (e.g. Jutte 2005; Classen 1993) but, in particular, on anthropological research, a field which, according to Howes (2003), has always expressed a marked interest in the senses (e.g. Levi-Strauss 1966, Geertz 1973, Howes 1991; Pink 2006; Stoller 1997; Feld 1982). The increasing recognition of sensory studies in the humanities and the social sciences is further demon-
Stratified by the establishment of journals such as the quarterly ‘The Senses and Society’ (eds. Bull; Howes, Kahn; Gilroy), edited anthologies such as the ‘Sensory Formations Series’ published by Berg and the installation of research groups such as the ‘Sensory Ethnography Lab’ at Harvard University, the ‘Center for Sensory Studies’ at Concordia University or the ‘Centre for Research on Sound Space and Urban Environment’ (CRESSON) in Grenoble.

The ‘sensory revolution’ sparked excitingly embodied, experimental and self-reflexive investigations and understandings of cultures and practices in everyday life. By blurring disciplinary boundaries and embracing non-positivist methodologies, “a sociology of the senses […] attempts, in large part, to rediscover humans’ sensuous, erotic, and aesthetic transactions with one another and their environment” (Vannini et al. 2012: 13).

**Sound Studies**

“Auditory space has no favoured focus. It’s a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing. It is not pictorial space, boxed-in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment” (Edmund Carpenter 1973: 35).

A recurring theme throughout literature in the context of this ‘sensory turn’ is the hegemony of vision (Stoller 1989; Howes 1991; Bull & Back 2003) and questions surrounding the implications, origins, and possible modes of resilience concerning the ocularcentrism that dominates sensory hierarchies throughout western cultures. The most consequential transformation in the employment and significance of the senses, as Marshal McLuhan’s ‘great divide’ theory states, happened with the progression from pre-literate, ‘oral’ societies to the ‘literate’ modern society and the resulting shift in ‘sensory ratios’ (McLuhan 1967). Whereas pre-modern cultures have been enacted and preserved through all the senses, in particular through the spoken word, the dissemination of print media
and the emerging convention of perspectival painting developed during the Renaissance, led to a “vigorous privileging of the vision. [...] Modern... men and women opened their eyes and beheld a world unveiled to their eager gaze” (Jay 1993: 56).

The proliferation of images in modernity, the advent of television, laptops, and smartphones reaffirms our culture’s visual dependency and the idea that “the concept of sight, like an object reflected in a room of mirrors, has assumed so many different guises in our culture that it can provide us with the illusion of a complete sensorium” (Classen 1998: 143). Seeing, therefore, is believing and the reasoning eye developed into the primary instrument for modern scientific practices. The ‘sensory revolution’ in the humanities and the social sciences, though, radically reconsidered this visual bias within academia and among western societies in general.

Under the assumption that “the reduction of knowledge to the visual has placed serious limitations on our ability to grasp the meanings attached to much social behavior, be it contemporary, historical or comparative” (Bull & Back 2003: 2), a growing body of literature not only investigates the general interconnectedness of the human sensorium and the ways it varies between and within cultures (e.g. Corbin 1995; Stoller 1989; Howes 1991) but, further, focuses on distinct sense-modalities such as smell (Corbin 1986), touch (Classen 2012), or taste (Korsmayer 1999) and their socially specific, enculturated, and historically changing application, stigmatization, and value. Among these pioneering studies about the senses and their social significance, scholarship concerning the subjects’ and the collectives’ relationships with each other, with their socio-political institutions, and their material and natural environments through sonic experiences takes up a major role.

Concerning the dominating visual mode of perception, research about and through sound and our auditory culture tries “to point to the equally crucial role that sound plays in our experience and understanding of the world (and claims) that a visually-based epistemology is both insufficient and often erroneous in its description, analysis and thus understanding of the social world” (Bull & Back 2003: 4). Whereas the visual impression offers us the world from a static, objective and dis-
tanced point of view, the world of sound, on the other hand, is dynamic, ubiquitous, a world of “sensations rather than reflections, [...] activities rather than artifacts” (Schafer 1988: 88). Douglas Pocock, in this regard, adds that

“[...] something has to happen for sound to exist. It is therefore temporal, continually and perhaps unpredictably coming and going, but it is also powerful, for it signifies existence, generates a sense of life, and is a special sensory key to interiority – unlike sight which presents surfaces” (Pocock 1988: 62).

In the humanities and the social sciences, though, sonic perception and the auditory environment are still mostly being denounced as a topic for suitable research since, supposedly, our auditory capacities are a prerequisite for any cultural constitution and not in themselves socially shaped modalities of existence. Sounds are considered linguistically (e.g. Mead 1934; Luhmann 1987) or musically (e.g. Adorno 1989; Blaukopf 1950) meaningful, whereas the clamorous sonic emissions of a society are but collateral noise. Even Georg Simmel’s ‘sociology of the senses’ (1997) considers listening and hearing only to emphasize the eye’s capacity to grasp the whole and the permanent whereas “one can much more readily deceive the ear of a person” (Simmel 2009: 575). “It is”, as Murray Schafer points out, “almost as if the great achievements of western philosophy and science were produced in a huge anechoic chamber” (Schafer 2003: 24).

The question arises if sound in itself can be an object for social-scientific inquiry. Is it possible to think of sound as a significant mediator of cultural formations, as a clue to possibly veiled yet affectively and emotionally meaningful social structures? Can we locate acoustic factors within our built environment which have an impact on our well-being, our modes of communication, and our physical and psychological health? Is it possible to determine sonic patterns of inequality, contestation, and communality which are sociologically significant? Martyn Hudson, in this regard, replies, that
“sounds are of course structured by the social world and emanate from it. [...] Sound is itself part of complex social discourses and cultures. [...] In this then, sound is very clearly a sociological object. It comes from the social and natural world and can tell us about that world” (Hudson 2019: 365).

Sound’s inherent potential to shape social space and behavior as well as our cultural, material, and socio-economical expression through sound becomes evident in the most recent proliferation of versatile and multidisciplinary publications related to sonic experience that now goes under the name of ‘sound studies scholarship’. Within this emerging and interdisciplinary area in the humanities and the social sciences, a manifold range of topics and priorities crystallized, such as the cultural histories of sound (e.g. Picker 2003; Smith 2007), sounds in architecture and urban planning (e.g. Bijesterveld 2016; Blesser & Saltner 2007; Thompson 2002), sound and the everyday (e.g. LaBelle 2010), philosophies and phenomenologies of sound (e.g. Voegelin 2010; Ermann 2011), sonic technologies (e.g. Bull 2000; Sterne 2003; Pinch & Bijesterveld 2004), religious and ritualistic sounds (Hirschkind 2006) or the relationship between sound and violence (e.g. Pieslak 2015; Gilman 2016; Stoever 2016). Furthermore, in addition to a variety of anthologies about sound and auditory culture (e.g. Bull & Back 2003; Sterne 2012;) there is a growing number of academic journals such as ‘The Journal of Sonic Studies’ or ‘Sound Effects: Interference’.

Sound studies, as an essential branch of the ‘sensory turn’, therefore, is the “name for the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival” (Sterne 2012: 2). The sonic world as it envelopes us, as it penetrates and resonates through every object, organism, environment thus can be listened to, can be described and analyzed not only in regards to its physical and objective properties but, furthermore, as expression and condition of social practices, since, as Jean Paul Thibaud points out, “environmental properties and the actor/perceiver activities cannot be disassociated, they shape each other. [...] We do not act in the acoustic environment but within it” (Thibaud 1998: 2–4).
Sonic Assemblages and the City

“Sound exists as a phenomenal presence involved in and determining the shape of the world. It partially defines our perceptual, emotional, spiritual and psychological spaces; and contributes to our understanding of ourselves, our environment, and our relationship to each other” (Brandon LaBelle 2002: 2).

Our sensation of reality, when perceived through sound, is inherently contingent, ambiguous, and full of doubt. The sonic world is pure presence, always now, slipping through our fingers as soon as we try to take hold of it. Its objectivity incorporates fragility, for the sonic impression, though intersubjectively shared, is unforeseeable, affective, fluid, ephemeral, and always knotted together with the listening subject's culturally, ideologically, and aesthetically conditioned ways of listening. In contrast to vision, which offers us a detached, static, and apparently truthful image of our surroundings and ourselves within them, listening happens from a submissive position, with one's whole body as a membrane, as a sensible surface upon which internal and external stimuli resonate and render reality ambivalent, processual, debatable: “sound, rather than the image preserves the human subject as a maker of culture, and thereby preserves culture as a dynamic production, rather than concluded artifacts” (Voegelin 2010: 100).

Sound as subjective perception, as well as social expression, is, therefore, never a neutral phenomenon. Each sound is endowed with historically, culturally, and individually distinct meanings and symbolisms and thereby emphasizes how environments, societies, and subjectivities are sensorially interrelated and actively constructed. The act of listening, therefore, always happens from within the sounding world, with us at the center of it. Similar to the notion of the ‘landscape’, which implicitly positions the observer and her sensuous faculty at the heart of the scene, the conception of the ‘soundscape’ breaks with traditional, positivist understandings of subjective experience as being separated from and subordinate to physical, objectively measurable ‘facts’. A soundscape, in contrast,
“is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world. [...] A soundscape, like a landscape, ultimately has more to do with civilization than with nature, and as such, it is constantly under construction and always undergoing change” (Thompson 2002: 2).

Even though, in Western societies, we are enculturated by the primacy of the eye and tend to ignore many sounds – in particular what is generally labeled as ‘noise’ – the soundscapes we inhabit profoundly affect us, guide us, generate a sense of belonging or seclusion, and, most of all, acutely connect us to our immediate environments. We hear sirens, signals, announcements and react accordingly (or not). We sense the presence of other people, hear them talk, hear them being quiet, listen to their words, to our own voices in reply. We perceive the tin can rolling and clattering in the wind, are startled by something breaking, follow its sound as it ricochets around facades and city streets. We hear airplanes, traffic, email alerts, outcries, mysteriously disembodied sounds from our heating systems, from the flat underneath, from seemingly nowhere as we lay awake in the night. We hear the children playing in our neighborhood, the well-known chiming of bells from the nearby church, the programmed elevator music, or the latest hits filling the spaces inside shops, waiting rooms, or office buildings. Subconsciously or not, we learn to understand and respond to our acoustic environments, instinctively interpret our footstep’s resonance, seemingly naturally sense our surrounding’s architectural idiosyncrasies, and echo-locate ourselves instinctively by interpreting countless minuscule sonic details simultaneously.

Listening, then, opens up towards an embodied yet discursive knowledge about the spaces we move through, about ourselves, each other, and the wider administrative frameworks that structure our daily lives. The way we employ our sense of hearing is, as is any other sense modality, informed by culture, learned and internalized as body knowledge. The perception of sound, understood as a social construction and as part of a cultural system, is thus an embodied competency.
that situate(s) actors and their agency in particular historical worlds. These competencies contribute to their distinct and shared ways of being human; they contribute to possibilities for and realizations of authority, understanding, reflexivity, compassion, and identity” (Feld 2003: 226).

Sound mediates and links, overlaps and disrupts. Sociality, subjectivity, the built and the natural environment reverberate as a processual, multi-layered, and interwoven sonic fabric which connects that which has been held apart by the map and the eye and the ordering rationality of modernity. Soundscape, as they are continuously created and recreated in time, are relational effects rather than stable and stationary certainties (Doughty et al. 2019), are metamorphosing and intricate networks of activities that clarify how culture, architecture and perception “are constantly in flux, interacting with each other, and exchanging their properties” (Farias & Blok 2017: 562).

To fathom spaces and the social dynamics within them as being constituted by historically changing, shifting, and interconnected layers of sensuous and affective encounters means to recognize their inherently ecological character (Amphoux 2019). Social environments, in this sense, are multiple, giving rise to heterogeneous yet patterned and often pre-determined interrelationships between urban landscapes and social behavior, between culturally stipulated norms, governmental regulations, the ambiguous employment of the built and the natural environment, and the intersubjective experience of the sensuous qualities of space. Listening to these multiple sonic ecologies, to the inevitable acoustic emissions of movements, interactions, and oscillations distributes “experience into a broader understanding of collectivity whereby the self is always implicated within surrounding space” (LaBelle 2006: 247). From an ecologically motivated position, historical as well as contemporary human environments, which so far have been regarded as ordered, structured and disembodied geographies (Karvonen 2011), are now, theoretically and methodologically, reunited with the listening body and the larger sociality they are embedded in (Vannini et al. 2013).
Spaces, reconsidered as relational and affective places which cannot be detached from the individual and collective dynamics that put them to use, therefore, can be perceived as multiple ‘assemblages’ of sonic, social, and environmental qualities in a constant state of progress and exchange (Revill 2016), an understanding which allows us to move away from the idea of ‘spaces as representation’ to a ‘more-than-representational’ notion of social environments (Thrift 2008) and how sonic perception has “the potential to reconfigure listeners’ relationship to place, to open up new modes of attention and movement, and in so doing to rework place” (Gallagher 2015: 468).

Not limited to, but in particular useful in the context of the contemporary city, a ‘more-than-representational’, phenomenologically and ecologically inspired approach to environments, a way of thinking about societies, spaces and the ‘every-day’ as being ‘assembled’ from innumerable interlaced flows, processes, and sensory impacts as it becomes widely acknowledged in the social sciences and in urban theory (McFarlane 2011), attempts to explore

“how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions, and sensuous dispositions” (Lorimer 2005: 84).

These myriad micro-performances, patterns, and sensations that produce the seemingly ordinary, everyday experience for the subject and the collective are “apprehended not just through the mind or the social, but through the body” (Lancione & McFarlane 2016: 45), and, consequently, compel us, as urban researchers and as sociologists of the senses, to position the sensuous subject at the center of investigation and to “connect social theory, with its often imperious gaze, back to the lives of the people in all their messiness” (Thrift 2005a: 345). Soundscapes, therefore, profoundly connect the listener to the places she inhabits or moves through, they encompass and flow through every object, material, and event and thereby reveal the affective, embodied, and resonant fabrics that lie beneath the delineated spaces of visual representation: “I experience my-
self in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me” (Pallasmaa 2012: 40).

Sound, space, and perception, as it was outlined above, belong together and thereby affect and are affected by the society, culture, or community in question. Urban soundscapes exhibit social structures and the omission of these affective correspondences in urban sociology inspired me to investigate more deeply the many-layered and ambiguously undulating sense- and soundscapes as they shape and are shaped by urban cultures and particular ways of listening. The chapters in this book, therefore, attempt to provide answers to the following question: “To what extent and in what ways is the social world shaped by the audible aspects of the natural and artificial environments that frame it?”

The overall structure of this book is threefold: The following two chapters are theoretical in nature and offer insights into the historical construction and transformation of soundscapes on the one hand, and into the countless, overlapping, masking, synchronizing, and controlling sonic assemblages that produce the contemporary city as a boundless, processual and profoundly sensorial experience on the other. Throughout the fourth chapter, I explore six distinct phenomenologically inspired ethnographic methods and their methodologies which seem particularly capable of making audible the intricate patterns, connections, and relations that fabricate our everyday sonic experience in the city. Finally, this book will be completed by an empirical investigation into various Viennese soundscapes with the aim to provide an extensive account of the city of Vienna as it is experienced sonically by the people who move in and through its various soundscapes; to highlight distinct urban places and situations that are perceived as troublesome and unhealthy on the one hand or uniquely comforting and pleasurable on the other; and to offer suggestions for architectural, political, and social improvement and interventions as to make the city a more harmonious, embodied, and sensually appealing place.