

Listening Against Soundscapes

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What is a soundscape? Named in 1969 by composer R. Murray Schafer, a soundscape is, above all, a conceptual apparatus—one designating an acoustic environment that listeners experience as surrounding them in space. Like anthropology's culture concept, the soundscape has a history. Schafer articulated the soundscape as a sonic version of landscape, an object of contemplation. In Schafer's pastoral conception, soundscapes might be judged by the extent to which "noise"—primarily, for him, mechanical and electric—had been exiled. While such a romantic worry no longer characterizes most mobilizations of soundscape—comfortable with urban worlds and broadcast space—contemporary treatments continue to approach soundscapes as things in the world, waiting to be tuned into. Tim Ingold in "Against Soundscape" suggests that soundscape objectifies sound rather than treating it as experiential. For Ingold, sound is an occasion of "our immersion in, and commingling with, the world in which we find ourselves." I wish to extend and complicate Ingold's critique.

A Technological History of the Soundscape Concept

For the soundscape concept to function it must presuppose a listener with a distinct attitude toward spatiality. To employ Steven Feld's useful term, such a listener must have an *acoustemology* that imagines persons as enmeshed in space, possessed of interior subjectivities that process outside objectivities. While such acoustemologies may range from the Cartesian to the Cagean, the soundscape concept has been enabled by technologies of regarding sound at an aesthetic and conceptual remove. Telephony, phonography, architectural acoustics—what Emily Thompson calls "the soundscape of modernity"—permit sound to be apprehended as an abstraction. The soundscape is a back-formation from such technologies, an after-effect.

One ricochet effect of such a media-modulated acoustemology has been the construction of what Charles Stankievecch calls the "impossible space" of the inside of the head, a conjuring reinforced, as Friedrich Kittler has suggested, by the invention of headphones, engineered to suggest a "psychedelic space inside the brain itself," or what sound artist Berhard Leitner terms a *headscape*. Jonathan Sterne's essential history of sound, *The Audible Past* (2003), names the binaural stethoscope as an earlier conditioning technology.

The point of this brief history is that the soundscape concept emerges from a mix of contemplative aesthetics and technologies of objectification and subjectification. The soundscape is shadowed by an acoustemology of space as given and listener as both apart from the world and immersed in it.

Following Lila Abu-Lughod's 1991 "Writing Against Culture," then, why not *listen against soundscapes*? Abu-Lughod writes that "culture is shadowed by coherence, timelessness and discreteness." She suggests that undoing the static character of such an articulation of culture can be achieved by three modes of "writing

against culture": attending to the dynamic character of discourse and practice, to unexpected connections between social worlds, and to the particular and irreducible.

How might we listen against soundscapes? One might begin with the observation that, contrary to Ingold, the soundscape has become haunted by the notion of immersion—the arrival of listeners at a sense of being at once enmeshed in space and, at times, porously continuous with it. Such immersion has a history and an infrastructure.

From Immersion to Transduction

I began to think this through after a 2004 dive to the ocean floor in the three-person research submersible *Alvin*. After being immersed in the Pacific inside a titanium sphere, immersed ethnographically in a cultural practice of oceanography, and immersed in the sounds of sonar and the surrounding sea, I wondered how such immersion—as a sense of presence and immediacy—was itself produced. After all, things could have disconnected at any time: the submarine could have malfunctioned, my composure could have given way to panic, and we could have disconnected from the sonar soundscape that kept us located in space.

Against immersion, I arrived at the analytic of *transduction*—the transmutation and conversion of signals across media that, when accomplished seamlessly, can produce a sense of effortless presence. For scientists inside *Alvin* to have a sense of being located in a space of sound, signals had to be transduced from the outside water to our interior air.

The underwater realm is not immediately a soundscape for humans. Sound travels four times faster in water than in air, and human eardrums are too similar in density to water to permit the transduction of most vibrations into tympanic movement in the ear. Moreover, conduction of sound by bone directly to the inner ear undoes differences between left and right, making sound omniphonic: coming from all directions at once. Naked human ears have the underwater zone not as a soundscape, but as a zone of sonic immanence and intensity: a soundstate.

The underwater circumstance made explicit the transductive work that is the foundation of an immersive soundscape. Such transductive dynamics might be more widely discerned in anthropologies of sound (kindred articulations of transduction appear in Julian Henriques's media studies of dub and reggae, in Michael Silverstein's linguistic anthropology, and in Sophia Roosth's research on scientists listening to cell sounds). I hear such transductive dynamics in the work of Charles Hirschkind, who argues that listening to recorded Islamic sermons helped the men in Cairo with whom he researched to acquire pious capacities that might be construed as transductive, capacitances permitting a flow between believers and religious messages—an interpretation explicit in an Islamic digest Hirschkind quotes: "The Qur'an is effective in itself, just as the electrical current. If the Qur'an is present [to your ears], and you have lost its effect, then it is you yourself that you must blame. Maybe the conductive element is defec-


tive" (2001:627). Underlining the ethical soundscape of which Hirschkind writes is an infrastructure of transduction supporting the presence of a believer to himself and to God.

Beyond Soundscapes

I am not suggesting that transduction is real, while immersion is simply mystification. The point rather is to gather a toolkit for thinking about how space, presence and soundscapes are produced. Transduction may work well in thinking through imagined sonic communities created by radio. It may also work well to think about the temporality of sound's duration—an element that David Samuels, Louise Meintjes, Ana Maria Ochoa and Thomas Porcello, in 2010's *Annual Review of Anthropology*, suggest has been missing from the anthropology of sound. Transduction may help us think about the acoustemology behind such claims as composer Michel Chion's that sound "unscrolls itself, manifests itself within time, and is a living process, energy in action." It may help decode the sensibility of electronic composer Bebe Barron, who, with her husband Louis, in 1956 crafted the electronic soundtrack for the movie *Forbidden Planet* and described a cybernetically created sound as a "life form." Transduction may work to unwind the otocentrism of sound studies, pressing hearing scholars to think differently about deaf worlds, thinking more capaciously, for example, as sound artist Wendy Jacob has done, about *vibration*.

Transduction may not work everywhere. It may not be helpful in getting at the ecologies of rainforest sound worlds such as those studied by Steven Feld; distance and presence might be otherwise materialized. Transduction may not work to think about Paul Stoller's work on Songhay possession, about which he writes that, "For the Songhay, the "cries" of the monochord violin and the "clacks" of the gourd drum are the voices of the ancestors, voices filled with the power of the past" (112). Transduction may not add anything to Richard Bauman's account of Quaker silent worship as a waiting to hear the voice of God within.

Also useful may be historian Hillel Schwartz's proposal in his forthcoming *Making Noise From Babylon to the Big Bang and Beyond* of a prepositional taxonomy of listening to, listening for, listening through, listening-in, listening out, listening over and listening with. I would add to this listening against: a style of anthropology of sound, of transductive ethnography, of theorizing against immersion, of hearing inside, outside and—ultimately—beyond the notion of the soundscape.

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