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For an anthropology of sound milieux

Perspectives from India

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Abstract. *Focused on different sound milieux in India, this paper examines public sites (residential areas, bus stations, Hindu temples, markets, etc.) as spaces for social interactions, cultivating different attention modalities and shaping specific social imaginaries. The ethnography is based on the study of ritual sound worlds (and public callings for praying), sonic tactics of merchants, techniques of distortion, sonic communication, and other manners to attribute to these sites a cultural identity as well as for users to share a community. Ambient sounds occupy several dimensions of daily life as well as political relationships. This paper is an introductory approach to the study of ambient sounds in their socio-cultural context of production and reception.*

Keywords: *anthropology, India, public areas, interactions, representations*

This paper is concerned with different dimensions of ambient sounds in India: it analyses the voice productions as callings of itinerant street sellers or other sound interactions encountered in different public spaces as residential areas, Hindu temples, markets, bus stations, etc. This research is part of a wider project called MILSON (“For an anthropology of sound milieux”) based in Paris at the CNRS, with the support of the Fyssen Foundation¹. This project deals with the ecology of sound perception and the models which have been built in various disciplines to study sonic techniques or strategies in their cultural context. This program’s aim is to propose new ethnographic tools for a better understanding of the aural sense in general, as culturally situated and in relation to social interactions as observed in public areas.

Though the study of ethnographic cases, we discuss the notions of noise, sound, and silence in general – and we explore the complexity of “sound milieux” in particular, that implies complex sound perception process and reveals spatial peculiarities. On the basis of field-work investigations, we explore various modalities of social life constructs and develop a comparative approach of their cultural contexts (India, Egypt, Japan, Italy, Romania, France...).

1. See the MILSON website : <http://milson.fr>



Journées d'études

anthropologie, histoire, art, architecture,
acoustique, informatique, musicologie

le 12 mai école des beaux-arts
le 13 mai musée du quai branly

Figure 1a and 1b. Posters of the MILSON meetings (2011-2012). Courtesy of Vincent Rioux and Thomas Brosset

The preliminary questions at stake in the anthropological approach of sound environments arose as such:

- The notions of sound, silence and noise, and the different legal frameworks governing the sound “pollution” in various countries;
- The different attention modalities to everyday life environments;
- The practical knowledge and theories of sound production developed in particular crafts, commercial activities, ritual activities, arts, sports, etc.;
- Sound milieux and their contemporary evolution according to political and religious norms;
- The social imaginaries that sound contributes to shape;
- The emotions and memories related to places and sonic interactions.

My own fieldwork is based in India where a sound environment, in spite of its exceptional variety, has rarely been studied. I look at (and record) various public spaces such as markets, stations or temples, considering them as “sound milieux”, where people are immersed, both as producers and listeners. In these public spaces, various voice techniques or sound displays are used to produce special effects to be heard from people or clients, to attract them, or to create different atmospheres. I will argue that in such spaces, people in their daily life usually experience a great diversity of listening postures. I suggest to analyse different attention modalities distinctively related to sonic spaces (such as surprise, captivation, devotion, intrusion, or disturbance). Indeed, the anthropology of sound milieux contributes to the shift of the analysis on a new basis: not about the properties of sound itself but on the social interactions that they are able to create², as well as the effects on perception. I suggest to move from a perspective based on the ontology of sounds to a perspective based on social action (and co-action).

2. See also Féraud, 2010; Guillebaud 2012.

Attention modalities in daily interactions

Several daily interactions and related attention modalities have been analysed in different public sites in India. Generally speaking, they highlight the different modes to capture attention (or to communicate) through sounds in various public spaces:

- Sound milieux in which sound techniques create a capturing effect by using distance that separates the source from his potential audience. Ex: The callings of itinerant street sellers.
- ...characterised by a high level and a proliferation of sound events (usually unintentional), that fosters many sound strategies and competition. Ex: The private bus stations.
- ...based on general and intentional sound organisation related to specific places and actions; with a strong cultural identity. Ex: The sound accumulation in Hindu temples (See Guillebaud, 2009).
- ...with sound signatures clearly identified by local dwellers and based on explicit sound techniques such as acceleration, reverberation etc. Ex: The public lottery voice.

The bus stand: a sound milieu shaped by (and for) commercial competition

For the sake of demonstration, I may introduce the example of the private bus stand, its sound organisation and the listening postures related. Indeed, such sound milieu is characterised by a high level and a proliferation of sound events, that particularly fosters many social interactions. Analysing a video capture of the site without sound, one may see different flows of people walking along the two sides of bus lines. In fact, the image do not account for the huge saturation of the sonic space, mainly made of callings of different ticket sellers and the sound of traffic. Standing back of their bus, they inform and catch the attention of clients in order to get the best commercial efficiency.

I may note that the way vendors announce the different destinations is substantially modified, a efficient mean to be understood in a faster way. For instance, "Kuntakulam" (the name of a city) becomes "kunlam, kunlam, kunlam"; Trichur becomes "chure chure chure". Such prosody is simultaneously emphasized by a peculiar timbre that have been also analysed through sonograms. The performance is also made of clearly noticeable cycles of gestures that contribute to a better attraction of people.

Another point is the strong visual organisation of buses: each bus has is own name, colour, and ornaments, as well as emblematic deities or posters, etc., that identify it, and create a strong visual contrast and also a visual competition.



Figure 2. Along the bus lines, Chennai City. Courtesy of Christine Guillebaud

In such sound milieu, the commercial competition is the driving force of the vocal performance. Here, and by contrast with ordinary selling's techniques, the aim is to be distinguished among a multiplicity of vocal occurrences and a huge sound traffic. The more sonically significant or salient you are, the more attraction you will get.

From the point of view of local people, everyone perfectly knows the general organisation of the bus stand. Each space in the station is dedicated to a particular destination (and it never changes). So, people know the direction to take. They are acquainted with a daily walk in the station. Consequently, a question arises: if anyone knows which bus to catch and where to reach the correct platform, why do bus ticket sellers shout in a so vigorous way? Indeed, their aim is firstly to fill up the bus, and the fastest as possible. Voice calling is another way to indicate that the bus will leave shortly, a kind of time announcement to the client. People walk in a flow and are sonically guided to catch the fastest departure, and without even the need of throwing a glance at the buses.

As compared to ordinary vendors, the action is not to suddenly attract the client. It is a strong sonic competition in order to be recognised among other simultaneously callings and traffic noise. In such context, the client is immersed in a sonic sphere that constrains him. All the crossings voices projected to its individual perception sphere will merely determine the commercial efficiency.

Other sites observed



Figure 3a and 3b. The accumulation process. Temple views during Hindu festivals. All rights reserved



Figure 4. The lottery announcement, an example of sound distortion used in public spaces. Courtesy of Christine Guillebaud

On a comparative basis, I finally take into account how different sound milieux juxtapose different sensorial experiences or competing each other. By multiplying the ethnographic examples, we may enable for a better understanding of the peculiarity of sound techniques as a way to stimulate, divert or articulate social interactions.

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