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The polyphonies which weave the city

Jean-Paul Thibaud, Luciana Santos Roça

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Besides the several subjects brought by this 14th edition of V!RUS journal, the cities are also woven into an invisible fabric. This fabric is the sound environment. It reflects cultures and ways of living and the way we and our society as a whole produce it.

We had the great pleasure to have a conversation with Jean-Paul Thibaud, sociologist, and urbanist. Professor Jean-Paul Thibaud founded the International Ambiance Network. In his research work, he studies the idea of ambiance within a multidisciplinary background. He is a researcher at Cresson, the Centre de Recherche sur l'Espace Sonore et l'Environnement Urbain (Research Center on Sound Space and the Urban Environment), and Professor at the ENSAG, Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Grenoble, France. Cresson is distinguished by its plurality and diversity of research and is also well known for its innovative methodological tools.

How many kinds of experiences shape the city? Voices, sound sources, moving and dynamic objects weave the city, being a part of it and determining its content. But how to apprehend this fabric in research activities?

Poetically, we can say that sonic space is woven by multiple voices. They do not regard only to speech. Even though language reveals a diversity of cultures, such voices also come from our daily activities, from music, traffic, and sound devices. As Thibaud (2017, p. 226) once argued, “we are thus immersed in a world of sound of which we take part and which everyone contributes to, producing through their daily activities and actions”. Sound also plays a significant role in the way we act upon the cities and how we perceive it.

The sound itself covers and reveals, at the same time, everyday experiences. Sonic space produces a polyphony which may or may not be masked, may or may not be noticed. It covers a number of relations when listening becomes a habitual act. If we are immersed in it, it is hard to reveal what is beneath. To defamiliarize may be an answer for it: by estrangement, we may ask ourselves what is beneath the ordinary sounds that surround us.

These are some of the matters discussed in this interview. The attentive look of the researcher Jean-Paul Thibaud conducts us through these voices, proposing a critical perspective on the privatization of sound space and the use of sound as a commodity.

Luciana Roça: What contributions do you observe from sound to the weaving plurality in the cities?

Jean-Paul Thibaud: The sound is impressive due to the possibility of playing different voices together, as in a polyphonic experience. When you listen to a particular place, you hear different sources, diverse voices coming from different people, and such public space is really composed of a full diversity of activities. It would be a tonality of this whole situation, but this affective tonality would consist of a lot of different voices appearing together. This polyphonic way of listening would bring what is interesting in sound.

Let's say the contrary, taking the example of a mall: you hear there virtually always the same kind of sound, continuous as a sole voice, the voice of the music diffused by different sources. This soundscape can neutralize, as the musical background masks the voices of people

A public place which is alive would be the opposite of this. For example, in France, we have local street markets. If you go to these markets, you hear a lot of different sounds coming from everywhere, a lot of different voices that are not continuous, one after another. All this composes the soundscape. Thus, in this situation, you listen to a unique composition of sounds. Not something that is one voice constantly, but a very dynamic plurality of voices, altogether, mixing and composing a very vivid soundscape.

Luciana Roça: Sound is an important element in the cities' experience. This matter seems nowadays to get more attention than before and, yet, many methodological problems persist in this research area. What methodological potentials and limits do you consider relevant?

Jean-Paul Thibaud: One of the main problems is that we have a lot of stereotypes when we speak about sounds. If we use classical Social Sciences methodologies, we are faced, in the very beginning, with many people talking about noise, annoyance or soundscapes which are good and full of music. So we have these great massive categories that prevent to go deeper into the real experience concerning sound.

Therefore, one problem would be: how is it possible to find different ways, methodologies, protocols to avoid this big stereotype and go deeper?

At CRESSON, we develop different methodologies. One of them, to mention an example, is called "Record of listening" which is essentially a way to use sound like an indirect way to ask people to talk about their experience. So, in this methodology, we go outdoor, into a public place we are studying, we listen to space, make a lot of recordings at different times of the day or the week, make observations and take notes. With these materials, we go back to the lab and work on specific soundtracks of the proper recordings. Then, we present the soundtracks to other inhabitants, people who live there, asking for their comments while listening to the soundtrack we produced. We do not ask for direct questions like "what do you hear" or the kind of things we ask when interrogating people, but we use the sound itself as a way to invite people to talk about their experiences.

Another methodology is walking as an approach to the experience. Here again, the idea is not to ask direct questions, but it is the act of walking in the streets. We go from a place to another, among different soundscapes and different sound qualities. This situation, this context of walking in such dynamic context would help people to tell their own experience while walking. So basically, the sound and space itself is the primary activator of people's speech.

We also use audio recording as a set of data. A long time ago we used to work on a construction site, studying its sounds and the way the workers use sounds to work together. So we do not ask workers to comment their experience while working. To sum up, we went to the site, recorded it, and the recordings themselves were the data. We listened to them over and over, and then we evolved to understand how the sound was used by the workers to communicate with themselves, to work together. They use the same kind of rhythm, temporality, maintaining the contact with each other because they can not see each other. We thus used the sound as a way to document their work.

Literature can be very very helpful. In literature, most of the time, there is a particular way to describe experiences. It helps us, therefore, to find out in a very subtle way to experience sound. At CRESSON, we were conducting a research on the silence in the city. One of the data sets was the contemporary literature of the 20th century. We had twenty or thirty different books, novels, and pieces of literature. It has been possible to find a paragraph or a short piece that described a particular experience of sound or silence. Thus, we had some material that would represent a whole different set of situations related to silence in the city. We use this data to analyze or to understand the different circumstances and contexts better.

Usually, one can find plenty of description of what people hear. The idea is that it is possible to find indirect ways for people to talk about their experiences instead of direct questioning, which gives directions of what people are supposed to talk about.

So I would say that one of the biggest problems is to question people too directly. In this case, they only repeat the general representation we have about soundscape, like sound or beautiful music. They would not go too far, too deep after that. There is a real need to innovate concerning methods, indeed.

Luciana Roça: Would there be a way to use these stereotypes against themselves? As a resistance or an antithesis?

Jean-Paul Thibaud: As I mentioned before, when you ask people directly they tend to reproduce a stereotype. One way to break this stereotype is to work on what we call breaching experiment in Sociology or Ethnomethodology. This comes from Garfinkel, an American sociologist. The basic idea is to develop a kind of protocol which is what happens when an ordinary situation does not happen as it was supposed to. So it breaks the logic of the current situation or what happens.

I once studied the use of headphones in public places. At that time, the use of Walkman was increasing, in the 1980s or 1990s. People were not used at all about these practices in public spaces. So there were many different reactions. How do people react when someone else does not hear the same thing although they are in the same situation? There is a kind of disruption of the ordinary to better understand what underlies a common experience. We don't realize it because we are on it continually. Therefore, this is another sort of methodology in which it is possible to design some protocols breaking the ordinary to understand what lies underneath.

In a certain way, we can observe that in the arts too. For example, we can mention Viktor Shklovsky [1], a Russian artist from the beginning of the 20th century, who worked on the idea of defamiliarization. Art as a way of defamiliarizing yourself, to better understand the background of the experience, what is never in the front. When you are aware of it, when you defamiliarize your experience, it can show you what is underneath.

Luciana Roça: Sound reflects actions and dynamics of urban spaces and, therefore, ways of living and cultures. Space and sound have both a profound interplay which is not often considered in Architecture. What limits do you estimate to exist in the sound-space relationship in Architecture and Urbanism?

Jean-Paul Thibaud: Once again, most of the time sound is taken into consideration to prevent some dramatic situation, to avoid the propagation of noise near airports, highways, etc.. This is a preventive logic or a way to deal with sound only afterward. Once the architectural project has been built, some mistakes are noticed, and architects have to work on them, to isolate them.

Still, I would say, one of the main mistakes is to consider impossible to deal with the sonic, the soundscape question, right in the beginning of the planning, of the design, and only work afterward.

The second topic is that some tools are not designed for sound. Because most of the time architects and urban planners use maps and CAD, which are very visual, usually employed also by professionals. Therefore we have to develop other tools capable of being more sensitive to temporality, rhythm, dynamics not included in a map, for example.

This is one of the dimensions of the sound. Sound brings the temporal dimension, but we truly miss some very operational tools that include rhythm, time, duration in the project and design. That is also a real challenge.

There have been some experiments, some ideas in order to go further in this kind of tools. You can find Cartophonie in CRESSON's website. Using this tool with sound recordings, we try to show how can space be organized, and the sound of different times and different temporalities. It is a kind of interactive map, with various levels to deal.

This could be one answer. The second one may be more general. In the 19th or even 20th century, one of the problems was the high amount of noise coming from the industry, for example. Industries are very noisy. So, one of the greatest problems was to reduce noise and to be in a more calm space, quieter. Nowadays, the question is different.

The topic is not "we have too much noise", but "we miss some silence". Our soundscapes are continually "on". We don't have the real opportunity to have some silence or quiet places. There is continually a kind of background noise behind your head. Then the question is how is it possible to build some intervals capable, in a way, of breaking this continuous noise.

The Italian anthropologist Gillo Dorfles brought a fascinating idea called the last of intervals. He argues that in our culture we always hear sounds, and this is continuous. And, of course, there is the example of music that is everywhere all the time, in every place. So we need some pauses. Is it possible to have some discontinuous sounds, that are not always continuous? I think it is a fascinating question to raise. Not only in a matter of level but regarding rhythm.

Luciana Roça: Can sound be approached as a dispositif for the "partage du sensible" [2] [distribution of the sensible] in the context of the cities?

Jean-Paul Thibaud: Yes, of course, it does. For example, there are many writings about sound sociopolitics. One of the main trends I would say now is about public spaces. More and more public spaces are privatized, and they are also privatized through and by sound.

If you walk in the streets, you hear music or different ads coming from the commercials, and they can invade other places. I would say that this is part of the "partage du sensible". Is it still possible to have a common public sound space? Or has sound space already been completely invaded by commercials and commodities? I think that sound can be studied in that way. For example, if I go to the mall, what do I hear? Of course, a lot of studies have been done about Muzak [3] and these kinds of dispositifs, but I think it is getting more and more subtle. Many companies are working on useful sound environments for making people to stay longer in commercial places, to lose the sense of time and spend more time in those commodity places. So I think that a part of the "partage du sensible" is guided by companies. This is one idea.

Another idea is the politics of noise in the cities. Some sound can be made, and some cannot; some can be heard, and some should not be heard. So there is all kind of regulations of how public sound should be and should not be.

A young researcher who came to CRESSON carried a research about the sound produced by homeless people in the streets. He realized that the sound marks a territory, and also that inhabitants reject their sound. Not only because it was a particular sound but because it came from homeless people. In a way, there is another logic: sound itself is not the object of rejection and conflict, but it is an expression of the presence of undesired people.

In another perspective, our sonic culture is also transformed by the tools we use. Let's take the example of technical electronic devices we use to listen to music, like mp3. Mp3 has a frequency spectrum that is more reduced when you compare to other dispositive. So the habits of hearing are getting less subtle because our range of perception is less and less nuanced.

Therefore, this is also a "partage du sensible" in the sense of how our soundscapes are richer or poorer than before. And who is in charge in these ordinary soundscapes? I would say, more and more companies. There is an economy of experience. Experience now is a good, able to make money, so money is made from experience. We manufacture experience, and the sound is part of this commodity.

Luciana Roça: How could we stand against this scenario of the commodification of sound?

Jean-Paul Thibaud: Disrupting the Ordinary is a way to understand better what we don't listen or see anymore because we are so immersed in it. So art could be a way just to stop a little bit the continuous flow of sound in everyday life, a way to build some dispositif which is going to englobe different perspective towards sound or soundscape. By creating these different points of view, we will be able to show the soundscape we are always immersed in; we will be aware and have a reflection of what we are always in. So maybe art is a major instrument, a major tool to allow some critical understanding of these questions.

I think that playing a resistance against the commodification of sound is a great work: breaking everyday experience in order to show what is underneath, to reveal some way to deal with it. This is why I was talking about Viktor Shklovsky before. I think maybe it is one of the first artists who brought this question about dismantling the familiar to reveal what is underneath.

Luciana Roça: What challenges do you perceive for this interdisciplinary field regarding sound, sociology, and urbanism?

Jean-Paul Thibaud: For me now the challenge is closely related to the resistance of art. It would be: "how is it possible to approach sound and to study it from its more minimum level, in a kind of molecular, infra level of listening?" Of course, a part of the 20th-century music works on this question. Is it possible to have a sort of minimalist way to listen, to compose, to organize sound? So I think this would be one of the primary challenges: is it possible to work in the infra sensible? It is just at the border, the limit of what is perceptible or not, of what you can listen or not. For me, this question is crucial. It is additionally important because people who work for companies also work on this question. Furthermore, they use this logic for commodities, advertising, etc., as an economy of experience. They work on these infra levels of perception. So I think that musicians and artists also have something to teach us to understand this infra level of perception.

Another one would be to work and organize all the diversity of sonic culture in the world, because we are so used to Western, classic, standardized sound that we lost our ability to hear, listen and appreciate all different kinds of sound cultures. Then this would be another challenge. We must pay attention to what other cultures have to teach us concerning listening. We lost our ability to distinguish the experiential level. That is something we must work on.

[1] Shklovsky, V., 2015. Art, as Device. *Poetics Today*, 36(3), 151-174.

[2] "I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution." (Rancière, 2004, p.12)

Rancière, J., 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated from French to English by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum.

[3] Muzak, originally, is a company of "background music" from United States whose golden age was during the decades of 1960 to 1980. However, the name of the company is used by Sound Studies to designate functional music that acts on the regulation and control of public spaces, spaces for consumption and work, mainly.

Suggested bibliography

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