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How does the dark sound?

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Abstract

Research on dark landscapes insists mostly on the sense of sight, as dark is primarily a seeable quality that comes as necessarily related to light. Nevertheless, in which ways darkness plays a role when it comes to the sonic apprehension of place, representations and experiences?

This paper considers dark soundscapes, through filmic representation, firstly, by focusing on how sonic atmospheres of dark moments are staged in fiction. In so doing, it points out that darkness appears to be sounded by using some sonic effects such as desynchronization, ubiquity, reverb and clarity. The recurrent use of these effects shows that, beyond being staging techniques, they come along shared representations of how dark urban place might sound.

Secondly, the chapter criticizes these ways of sounding dark urban landscapes in fiction, by analyzing a set of recordings and interviews that were made in dark urban settings. They show how a dense understanding of dark soundscapes contributes to widening one of urban atmospheres as synesthetic processes. In conclusion, this chapter contributes to showing that visual and sonic dark landscapes share more than visual and sonic landscapes in light, as they both built on co-extensive temporal and pragmatic processes.

The interest in the question of darkness contributes to extending research on space and places by opening it to the theme of cosmic rhythms and their effects on the social world. Many of the social science works on night and darkness have shown how night, as a particular time of social activities, and darkness, as a specific quality of the ordinary luminous environment, configure specific ordinary and professional practices and policies (Fiori, 2000; Dunn, 2019; Ebbensgaard, 2019a; Gwiazdzinski, 2019); concern different groups (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2018); and refer to specific representations, values and imaginations (Koslofsky, 2011; Edensor, 2017a). In this sense, these works show that considering space and places in a situation of darkness does not amount to setting up a negative mirror of the situation of light, as does the “day for night” – or “American night” in French (a filmmaking process to make sequences filmed in daylight appear as if they are shot at night by the use of a material, or post-processed color, mostly blue filter). In doing so, through their interest in understanding the relationships that articulate place and darkness, these works unfold the lived worlds to highlight a blind zone of most urban research, as well as research on place which, without saying, is research applied to clarity. And these studies show the importance of understanding the reconstruction of a standardized universe based on clarity, the richness of alternative experiences and the diversification of the sensory world it proposes.

Moreover, among the small existing body of work on darkness, most of these insist on the sense of sight, as dark is primarily a seeable quality that comes as necessarily related to light. Nevertheless, in which ways does darkness play a role when it comes to consider other senses than sight? As an example, one can easily imagine the smell of fresh dew emanating from grass as a feeling that can be associated with dawn. Randomly picked out of multiple other situations, this example illustrates how cosmic rhythms configure not only a visible luminous environment but also a complete set of sensory phenomena, imaginaries and uses, the understanding of which completes the understanding of the relationship between place and society. In this chapter, I will focus on the sonic apprehension of place and examine which representations and experiences go along darkness from an auditory point of view.

A dark sonic world?

What is darkness? In standard dictionaries, darkness refers to the absence of light, or to the dark, dimly lit character of an object. Figuratively speaking, darkness refers to the lack of clarity or intelligibility of a speech, situation or action. The idea of darkness refers here to the fact that the contours of an idea are difficult to discern insofar as it is presented in a nebulous way. From these two levels of definition, we understand that the notion of darkness is based on the visual apprehension of the lived world. In addition, the second level of definition proposes a metaphorical use of the notion that allows this visual quality to be applied to other domains. In this sense, talking about a dark sound environment can then lead to the idea of the sound quality of a dark visual environment: cavernous, for example. In the same way, the notion of darkness is used in psychoacoustics as a descriptor of a deep, low, rumbling sound quality, thought in opposition to a clear and crystalline sound in the treble, as Gabrielsson and Sjögren (1979) indicate. Moreover, while social science’s works on darkness show its association with rather negative historically, socially and culturally built representations (Koslofsky, 2011; Edensor, 2015a), the aforementioned work shows that in experimental situations, no obvious association between the terms “pleasant” and “natural” and the darkness/brightness division is made. There is therefore a form of disconnection between the realm of visual representations, for which it is common to see an association between the luminous quality of darkness and emotions as negative representations, where nothing seems to confirm it in the world of sound reproduction. Nevertheless, this work essentially raised the question of sound reproduction in an electroacoustic chain and is based on a method in which the point is to characterize heard sounds without questioning the associated imaginaries of the listeners, which are notably considered as “normal subjects” rather than differentiated individuals.

It thus remains necessary to shift the focus, that is, to move away from sound reproduction and experimentation specific to the field of environmental psychology, in order to focus on lived spaces, addressed through situated methodologies. However, before we get to that point, let us indicate why a focus at the sonic dimension of (dark) lived space is of interest. As Jean-François Augoyard (2001) points out, urban research and research on ordinary practices are marked by an “epistemological voyeurism: everything passes through the eye and everything is fragmented, cut up and isolated”. In pointing this out, Augoyard not only highlights that the domain of research on place and societies – which is quite capable of critical reflexivity when it comes to pointing out the power relations and the issues of domination that run through it – is less so when it comes to considering the modes of apprehension of the lived world – which is still mainly considered to be visually grasped. This criticism is at the origin of a number of works aimed at apprehending ordinary space by different meanings from that of sight, and more broadly than those that have taken into consideration the sensitive environment, or even ambiances. Augoyard’s remark also points out an epistemic posture that he entrenches to the visual capture of the world: the one that presupposes an ability to see things, to be able to distinguish them and to be able to classify and explain them, which remain contradictory with the positioning of comprehensive sociology or research on everyday life that shows, on the contrary, the whole point of a contextualized capture of the world and the limits of explanatory approaches. Seeking to hear the world, as one could try to smell it, to walk it, to taste it and so forth, is underpinned by a double objective: to characterize other fundamental dimensions of the lived space of societies, and to bridge theoretical-methodological gap with regard to a field of research that does not systematically question its privileged mode of apprehension of the world it aims to understand. In this sense, such an approach that aims to get away from the visual raises the same kind of questions as those asked in this entire book. Because of its interest in darkness, it questions a very large majority of the work on space and society, which presupposes the neutralization of brightness dynamics. They also might remain indifferent to the degrees of clarity and illumination of urban space, whereas these are the subject of design practices and of specific uses and convey new representations. So, what does the consideration of sonic territories imply?

Sonic territories, Milieux, landscapes or environments?

The sonic and visual worlds are not the same, and their understanding cannot be achieved with the same tools. Where the part of the visual world relies on materialities constituting a stable and representable environment, the sonorous world alone is necessarily related to practices, activities, motion, gesture and vibration. As atmospheres, sound is pervasive, transient, always evolving; it is “qualified time” (Augoyard, 1991). To illustrate metaphorically, if the visual world might be understood to be already there, the sonic world is rather always becoming. Therefore, in order to understand and act on the built space, the consequences are no less important since sound is neither fixed nor durable, but temporary and situated. Moreover, the sonic world is made up of interactions between spaces and makers of noises, sounds and silences, which are not the same at all times and places, and which cannot be assigned to defined subjectivities. Therefore, thinking about the sound dimension of space plunged into darkness implies indicating what is meant by sonic territories.

In a seminal article on the sonic dimension of space, Pascal Amphoux (1994) proposes to distinguish the sonic world through three modes of apprehension that an individual can make of it: the sound environment, milieu and landscape, or otherwise called functional, interactional and aesthetic. This conception of the sonic world does not divide it into exclusive parts (e.g. noise against music) but rather adopts a pragmatic posture that emphasizes the effect of the course of action and the intention of the subjects with the sound world in which they find themselves on their understanding of it. In so doing, this approach cannot provide a definitive status to certain sound signals or environments, unlike the normative approach of soundscape (Schafer, 1993) which aims to preserve certain sounds classified by the figure of the expert to the detriment

of others, and contributes ultimately to discredit ordinary, banal, everyday sonic worlds, insofar as they would lack qualities.

This is not to suggest that this chapter aims to provide a firm and definitive definition of what the sound of darkness would be, as this would be in contradiction with the multiple, differentiated and complex conception of the lived world as we understand it. In this sense, I will use the notions of sound environment in turn to focus attention on signals, sound milieu to designate sound productions at the heart of situated interactions and finally sound landscape to evoke an aesthetic relationship to the sound world. Sound territory, for its part, indicates more broadly the space constituted in the deployment of sound practices, which can be understood according to the three modalities described earlier. More broadly, this territory derives from a set of practices, sensations, perceptions and representations that produce spatial, social and cultural relations between humans and non-humans, that encompass all the senses. In saying so, the kind of processes that are presented in the following section might certainly work as well for other senses than sound.

Dark sonic territories, practices and representations

To start understanding what a dark sonic landscape might be, let us perform a thought experiment. Imagine that the very room in which we are reading these lines is briefly plunged into the dark. Would it sound different?

Obviously, the luminosity of a place does not affect its sound. The main difference in a bright or dark setting here would have something to do with the iconic sound composition from John Cage *4'33* (1960), in which the listeners had to listen to the quasi-silent sound of a room full of listeners for 4 minutes and 33 seconds. Darkness might at first create an acousmatic situation, meaning a situation that intends to develop the sense of hearing, imagination and perception of sounds, by getting rid of the light, in order to help the brain not being overstimulated by visual information. Pythagoras used to teach philosophy to his disciples in the dark and behind a curtain, in order to make them focus on his speech only. From a phenomenological perspective, despite a potential greater attraction to some background noises, we should not hear a difference coming from our surroundings, coming from the space around us. And one of the reasons for that is that we might be reading this in a human-built-environment for humans in which the surrounding atmosphere has been engineered and is managed. As dark is a visual quality, there is no obvious sound of the dark. Nevertheless, this thought experiment (as most thought experiments do) puts too many things in brackets: first and foremost, it started with the assumption that this book was read in an interior setting, and that the sudden darkness would not have changed the ongoing interactional situation. More importantly, this thought experiment shows that there might be no such thing as a one and definitive sound environment of darkness, but what about milieus and landscapes?

To answer this question, we need to consider actual situations of darkness. Firstly, I will use audiovisual products in order to show how darkness is designed to sound dark in staged situations. Audiovisual products are useful to understand how the sound identity of darkness is constituted in films by showing whether it depends on environmental or constructed factors. These observations will be confronted with the results of a survey conducted in underground Parisian spaces, in particular subway stations, car parks, passages, all characterized by darkness, and which raises the question of the ordinary sensory experience (and sonic in particular) that their users make of them.

The sound of darkness in movies: one emblem-sound and...?

I had a sonic tour in a personal movies library. This collection is made of hundreds of films directed within the last 70 years coming from all continents (nevertheless, Western films are over-represented), mixing

different genres – popular and confidential, comedy, action, drama, documentary – and listened specifically to all scenes shot in the dark while keeping the following questions in mind: What do we hear? How do we hear it? How has it been staged? In this whole repository of films, there is only one obvious and clear identifier of dark scenes, which specifically happens to designate night. This is the sound of singing insects, such as tree crickets, katydids and cicadas. These insects, as sonic sources, are almost systematically used to stage, sonically, night in non-urban settings. This sound comes in almost evidently in mind when imagining the sound of night, and is used in novels and music pieces, and is probably one of the most shared intersubjective figures of the experience of night in rural settings, as well as in urban parks. But why is this sound seemingly characteristic of night in movies? As Michel Chion (2009) indicates, there is a historical rejection of real sound in cinema, which is considered to be hyperrealistic and creates a redundancy between pictures and sound. For this reason, since the very beginning of sonorous cinema, sound has been considered as having to play a role as another field that only existed before in imagination. Sound then exists in a triangular relationship, with image and its significant. This is why Chion proposes the notion of emblem-sound, which means that a kind of figure presented on the screen (e.g. a cat) can only produce one sound (e.g. “meow”). Here, this first exploration within movies shows that night in films is visible through the image of darkness and goes away with the emblem-sound of “chirping”. This emblem-sound comes as obvious in natural settings in which dark would come with night, as opposed to day and light, and follows a cosmic pattern, engaging with biological patterns conducting to the production of such sounds. For the viewers, this sound works as an emblem of night, and is frequently used to design dark sonorous environments in non-urban settings, because of its capability to trigger anamnesis of situations or atmospheres already experienced in the past. In this case, hearing appeals to memory, where a sound acts as a *madeleine de Proust*.

The wildlife sounds heard in the movies used here relating to dawn or night are always diegetic: they correspond to what is visible or imaginable on screen. Nevertheless, sounds in movies exist in three different forms (Chion, 2009). They can come from what is happening in the picture (In). They can come from a source out of the frame (Out). Or they can be completely exterior to the diegetic action, as music or voice-over (Off). In the case of wildlife, they clearly refer to In and Out fields. They play a reminiscence role and characterize a sonic activity that happens in the overall environment. Nevertheless, there arises a problem from the fact that this emblem-sound was the only clear marker of night heard in the movies used here. If this kind of sonic signal works as an emblem-sound of darkness in non-urban settings, it remains semantically associated with night. Or, while considering space, place and societies, there is no necessary relationship between dark and night as the environments taken under consideration are artificial. Dark could therefore be thought, engineered and staged. It could also be mastered by artificial lighting. Moreover, it remains fundamental to maintain the previous step to the side, which consists in not seeking a typical sound environment of darkness but rather to seek the way in which darkness is illustrated in terms of sound in the production of specific sonic milieus or landscape, whether they derive from a repertoire of design practices or are embedded into the ordinary uses of space.

Off sounds, and particularly music, are used not only with an aesthetic intention but also to influence the viewer, in the process of giving a meaning through cultural representation associated to a specific genre. For example, in Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* (1978), and in *Alphaville* (1965), directed by Jean-Luc Godard, both movies start in a very dark setting. They both stage a testimony of what great cities are supposed to be: tall, built, dark and gloomy, and at the same time populated by flow and motion, mysterious, massive and impressive. Woody Allen opens his film with George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* music and a very clear and bright male voice-over. On the contrary, *Alphaville* opens with Paul Misraki dissonant music and a hoarse voice-over. While the images of each movie do not obviously present differences, atmospheres are carried by Off sounds, which in the first case contribute to making the symphony of the great American city happen, while in the second a feeling of anxiety and fear derives from the sonic composition which underlines the dangerousness of an unidentified form of power.

These two examples illustrate the role of Off sounds, which, in addition to providing elements of composition of the sensitive and ambient background, also contribute to the scenography of atmospheres and associated affects through their power of action on the representations associated with filmic images. In this sense, the production of meaning and values in movies is played out in the knot that links sound and visual worlds. On the one hand, the diegetic sound-emblem of “chirping” is significant of night. It is an In sound which, by imitating reality, has the role of making night scenes appear as if they were happening at night, and designates by metonymy the luminous situation of darkness. On the other hand, Off sounds, as additional elements, not derived from the image but intertwined with it, play a metadiegetic function of creating an atmosphere by deploying a sound context – which could be semantic or not – created by a staging decision. These elements, the signal which is intended to assume the function of universal night sound on the one hand, and the construction of atmosphere by adding elements outside the situation on the other hand, are still an insufficient proof of what the sound of darkness can be. It is therefore appropriate to extend the examination of the filmic sequences, but by leaving aside the question of the nature of the sound sources, or of the type of music or additional sonic content, to focus on their modes of appearance, so as to manifest relationships of perception and action specific to the sonic milieu, and possibly landscape, constituted in darkness.

Movies versus world: three sonic effects that illustrate a shift between the experience of place and its staging

To understand the sonic milieu constituted in the observed situations, I will consider the way sound events become manifested to the listener. This means that the issue is no longer about designating the identity of audible sound elements but rather about understanding their patterns of existence: how the sound situation is born, unfolds, transforms and eventually vanishes. To do this, the notion of sonic effect (Augoyard and Torgue, 2005) is mobilized as it aims to understand sound phenomena at the heart of the material and micro-social situations in which they appear. Originally sonic effects have been developed with the objective of characterizing the urban sound environment, which appears to be a third way between noise and music, and which requires an apprehension tool that is likely to characterize the production or reception of sounds, not aiming at a normative objective of noise control, but at precisely characterizing what happens between the sound phenomenon on the one hand, and its contextualized use on the other hand.

The attention is directed here only towards diegetic sound events in film sequences, so as to question the modes of sonic manifestation of darkness in cinema. Nevertheless, in films, In and Out sounds are also staged; it is therefore meaningful to examine whether the modes of constitution of the sound environments from darkness to cinema remain relatively faithful to reality, or whether they contribute to the construction of representations, either because of narrative construction or by exposure effect, which aims at underlining so much, in order to make them appear more than real. To do so, I will cross the sonic effects found in these screenings with the results of a sound ethnography conducted in Paris metropolitan area (Masson, 2012, 2014) – underground and passages (often dark) – which focus on the sonic identity of these spaces, and the relationship between sounds, mobile practices and emotions. Investigations took place at three distinct times of the day: peak, off-peak and night hours. Indeed, since the survey environments are artificial, ambient conditions vary, essentially with human activity. This sound ethnography consisted of a large recording campaign coupled with 40 commented city walks with sighted and blind users of these spaces, which focused particularly on the sound dimension of the environment.

Desynchronization is the first sonic effect noticeable in movies when it comes to stage darkness. It characterizes the emergence of sonic events that break an existing sonic organization. It might provoke weirdness, or even surprise, as darkness reduces the capacity for viewing, and therefore the subjects have to rely on past experiences to create a coherent image of the surrounding sounds. This effect was also noticed in the commented walks in underground spaces at night, but not in peak and off-peak hours. It

clearly emphasizes the socio-cultural meanings associated with sounds. At off-peak hours, as well as at night, there is a clear diminution of sounds. Nevertheless, at off-peak hours, the listening regime was directed towards the environment and its description, while oral testimonies at night show an attention more directed towards human and social sounds, and particularly focusing on the congruity or incongruity of these. Therefore, most of the unattended sonic events witnessed contributed to direct attention towards them and appealed a need for identification. In movies as well as in the survey, desynchronization is a sonic effect that necessarily appears as Out sounds. On the one hand, they come from outside the limits of the screen; on the other hand, they emerge outside the field of visibility. In both cases, this effect underlines the non-matching sonorous and visual geographies and is associated with discomfort as long as there is no possibility of a visual confirmation of the nature of the heard sonic event.

Ubiquity is the second sonic quality found in most movies. It is an acoustic effect that has to do with propagation of sounds that makes it very difficult or even impossible to localize the spatial origin of the sound, as this one comes out from nowhere, or from everywhere. This could be the showering sound that seems to come from above and the hyperlocalized sound coming from beyond the walls that surrounds the listener at the same time. This effect was also noticed in the field survey, in which it relates to the very architecture of the space investigated, as underground spaces, passages and subterranean parking lots are made of pipes, tunnels and corridors. These are fundamentally built using hard materials such as rock, concrete, often – for normative hygienic matters – left as such or covered with ceramic tiles, all which are extremely reflective and reverberating from an acoustic point of view. It is therefore quite surprising to witness that in movies, this effect comes along with darkness quite often, even when the visual situations are staged in open settings. More than insisting on the distinctive sonorous and visual geographies as the effect of desynchronization does, sonic ubiquity underlines a metaphysical dimension of the heard sounds that overcome the visible world and act as a reminder of the limits of visibility. The use of this effect in movies supports iconic and quasi-obvious puzzling atmospheres of darkness associated with fantasy.

Clarity is the third sound quality present in movies. It characterizes the accuracy of sonic signals. As dark comes often with the representation of lesser activities, it also appears that the few sounds that are given to be heard in dark settings in movies become more precise. This staging technique is here to support the fact that the lack of light is compensated by a better sonic accuracy. Sonic signals appear to be more separated from the others and seem to come in a well-thought composition. Combined with the effect of desynchronization and of ubiquity, clarity contributes to strengthen the dramatic power of sounds: a clear sound, coming from nowhere, subsequently incongruous. There, a clear distinction between fiction and actual space appears. In the ethnography, clarity always comes associated with sight. A crystal-clear sound in daily practice is not a pure sound in acoustic terms (which it sounds like in movies), but a sound directly associated with its source. In reverberating underground passages, these are, for example, the sound of people's steps, strengthened if wearing heels, as well as voices. They are a clear sonic marker of presence. Clarity is also associated with a lesser presence of individuals and practices, making each sound easier to seize and to understand, instead of having to deal with a mix of multiple sound sources. In films and surveys alike, the clarity effect associated with darkness is often linked with a less intense sound environment, with a lower sound level. The consequence in films is that diegetic sound situations that are less phenomenally loaded are often highlighted by extra-diegetic sounds in order to give some atmospheric flesh to a seemingly too poor visual content. One of the very rare counterexamples is *Gravity*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón, which insists a lot on long sequences in dark space, without any sound, in order to make the viewer get the sense of the depth of the void.

In this chapter, I have shown that asking the question of the sonic dimension of darkness makes sense, where one might be tempted to answer at first sight that the different sensitive aspects of the artificial world only respond in a contingent way. Indeed, research on the sensitive dimensions of living space often tends to divide it up by thinking of it in terms of distinct sensitive modalities: sound, smells, walking, light or

darkness and so forth. These split modes of apprehension do not only refer to a methodological issue (it would be easier to understand different sensory modalities in isolation) but also follow a logical imperative: distinct sensitive phenomena are not necessarily linked. By adopting a comprehensive and atmospheric approach to the interactions between the luminous and sonic qualities of the environment, this chapter does not contribute to indicating that there would be a sound of darkness, but rather follows the vein opened by several works indicating how the relationship to darkness is socially and culturally constructed, and this construction affects other sensitive areas, here sound in particular.

Thus, by mobilizing cinema, we have shown that darkness is constructed using a very specific vocabulary, and a very specific grammar, of sounds and forms of appearance of them. The effects present in diegetic sounds, the staging of Off sounds, as well as the use of the emblem-sound of “chirping” show that there is no obvious sound of dark landscapes but some quite clear representations of how the dark might sound, notably in movies, which do not necessarily depict (or desound?) reality. The focus on the qualities of existence of In and Out in situations of darkness make it possible to reconfigure the triangular relationship (image, sound-emblem, significant) proposed by Chion, which seems to be rather expressed through the following triad: visual quality (darkness), specific sound appearance modes (manifest by the sound effects identified) and affective atmosphere. Taken in a generic way, this triad becomes: sensitive quality, modes of appearance of a phenomenon, affective atmosphere. It offers a descriptive and analytical tool distinct from the semiotic approaches to propose to the visual research, which does not seek anymore to designate the signifiers in presence, but helps at understanding the ways in which they appear, radiate in their environment and affect it and its bodies.

The film repertoire used here is not intended to be representative nor to provide definitive and undifferentiated conclusions on how sound is used in cinema. It would have been both impossible and pointless to try to list the films watched here, or to try to pretend a reasoned selection has been made for the purpose of this chapter, as it does not aim to question sound staging from a film studies’ perspective, but rather to make use of films to illustrate certain representations and understand their relationship with ordinary experiences.

Obviously, there are many practices, and they need to be considered in a contextual way since films are also historical, social, cultural and economic products. This explains our choice not to conduct a systematic investigation into a reasoned corpus of films, but rather to look for a few sensory transversal lines that give a praxeological account of certain sound uses that echo obscure visual situations. This use of films is also a contribution to research on atmospheres, which is very concerned about the ability of audiovisual productions to capture or reproduce atmospheres (Brayer, 2013; Simpson, 2015). In this sense, a pragmatic approach of atmospheres (which seek to understand what they do, rather than what they are) makes sense for an analysis that makes a non-internalist use of films, by putting them in tension with the results of a field study, in order to think each of the corpuses beyond their limits, and systematically in relation to each other.

Resuming to urban research and practice, this chapter also contributes to show that visual and sonic dark landscapes share more than visual and sonic landscapes in light. Indeed, when it comes to apprehend them in terms of territory, they both resist a dominant visual apprehension that cannot overcome the absence of light. Consequently, dark territories might relate to sound, smell, distorted vision, kinesthesia and so on, and share the very character of being produced, perceived and enacted from the inside, by the very practices of their users, while territories in light make possible visibility and the dominant overhanging sight, which allows understanding and action at a distance. Dark landscapes are rather temporal, and as atmospheres they can fold and unfold, they are labile and shapeshifting and evolve at the crossing of materialities, practices and sensitivities.

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