

## Hearing Montparnasse

ELa workshop - 15,16/05/18

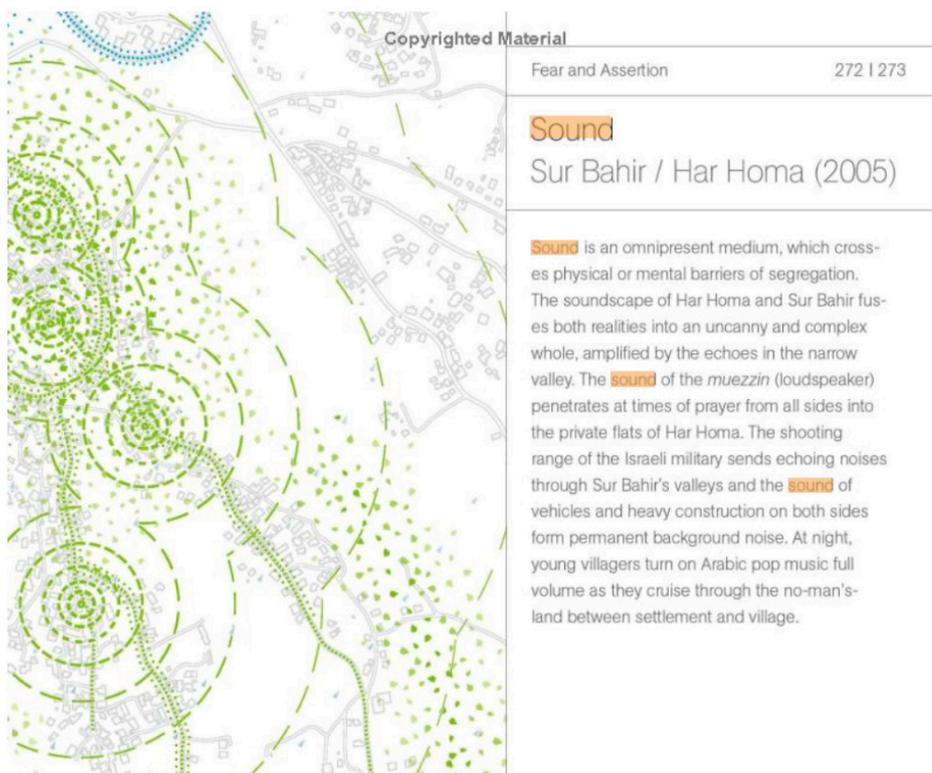
### Reader

- Nadim Mishlawi, 'Dissonance and urban discord', *The New Soundtrack 2.2* (2012): 159–167
- Philipp Misselwitz and Tim Rieniets (eds) *City of Collision: Jerusalem and the Principles of Conflict Urbanism* (2006)
- Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (2006)
- Graeme Thomson & Silvia Maglioni, *Idiorrhythmy* (2017)
- Rayya Badran, *Radiophonic Voice(s)* (2010)
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- John Cage, *Lecture on Nothing* (1961)
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- Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening - A Composer's Sound Practice* (2005)
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- Vijay Iyer, *Beyond Objects, Beyond Scores* (Guernica Magazine Interview) (2016)
- Steve Roden, *Active Listening* (in *Long Beach Sound Festival Catalogue*) (2005)
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- Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Loss* (in *The Auditory Culture Reader*) (2016)
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- Jeff Veitch, *Mithraic Noise* (2017)

Beirut is a city where nothing is fulfilled and everything is left pending. Derelict buildings are scattered throughout the city alongside glimmering modern towers, together illustrating Beirut as the city suspended in free fall between its future and past. The citizens, with their exploits, conflicts, ideologies, and hidden agendas have produced a history of waste that has, over time, been allowed to accumulate and overwhelm the city. And among the most invasive and obstructive forms of urban waste sensed in Beirut is that of excess sound, or what would be referred to in other urban settings as 'noise pollution'.

The sounds of the past do not fade out, but sustain indefinitely. And despite their persistence, new sounds are produced and layered on top of the old ones. Sometimes the initial sounds remain audible, at times garbled and at others comprehensible. Sometimes they merge with the newer sounds to create synthesised, abstract 'soundscapes'. The volume shifts. Then cuts and glitches occur further distorting the soundscape. And soon a heaving cacophony of sounds tears through the city while a handful of 'info-merchants', deaf and mute, mix the sounds as they please, using their remixes in a battle for survival. Who has the loudest mix? Who has the strongest mix? Who has the newest mix? Who has the longest mix? And all the while, the confused chattering of people who try to 'make their voice heard' is swept up into an incessant hum that in turn drowns out the hope of deciphering anything remotely comprehensible. [...]

In simple terms, noise pollution in Beirut is an excess of sounds battling one another in a fight for survival. In the cities of 'modern' nations on the other hand, noise pollution is a side effect of excessive urban development; it is in fact a sign of technological and infrastructural progress that, because of insufficient monitoring, has exceeded the level of general tolerance. But it is nonetheless a sign of life. In contrast, noise pollution in Beirut is not a result of progression or of regression, but rather a result of paralysing stagnation. The endless loop of the national anthem, the echoing of political speeches, the calls of equality from the lower classes, the tortured screams of thousands of massacred civilians, and the unresolved clash of opposing political factions, are all superimposed in a collage of garbled nonsense. And this situation denies the possibility of rediscovering the only solution to overcoming noise pollution, that act which prevents a society from falling into such a dilemma to begin with: listening.



From Philipp Misselwitz and Tim Rieniets (eds)  
*City of Collision: Jerusalem and the Principles  
of Conflict Urbanism* (2006)

I climb into a taxi cab just outside of the Ramses Mosque in the city center. The driver steers onto the busy thoroughfare of Ramses Street, and listens. A sermon struggles out through the frayed speakers and dust-encrusted electronics of a tape player bolted under the taxi's dashboard, just beneath a velvet-covered box holding a small Quran.

The voice careens and crescendos along its rhetorical pathways, accompanied by the accumulated vibration, static, hiss, and squeak inherited from the multiple copies that have preceded the one now in the machine. Street noise picked up by the microphone continually rises up to engulf the speaking voice, redoubling the sonic jumble of horns, shouts, the rattles and pops of rusted exhaust pipes now buffeting the car.

In the back seat, two friends joke and laugh together, their bodies pushed and pulled as the car proceeds through the congested alleyways, jerking, braking, jumping forward. Billboards advertising computer parts, soft drinks, and the latest films loom above the storefronts and crowded sidewalks. The driver hits the horn at a car attempting to cut in front of him, as the voice on the tape intones a Quranic verse on the inescapability of death: "Every soul tastes death ..." (kullu nafs dha'iqā al-mawt). A wave of cries from the mosque assembly pierce through the background noise and the thick layer of reverb, the driver's lips lightly and inaudibly tracing the contours of the words "There is no God but the one God," as he accelerates ahead of the car seeking to pass him. One of the men in the back stops his conversation to comment: "That preacher must be Saudi. They're the ones who really know how to scare you". The recorded voice begins a series of supplications as the cab passengers go back to their previous conversation and the driver adjusts the volume knob: "May God lessen the death throes for us. May God light our graves. May God protect us on Judgment Day."

The speakers rattle as the crowd roars "Amin" after each supplication. The taxi stops at the entrance to the 26th of July Bridge, named in celebration of Egypt's 1973 war with Israel, and the two passengers pay the driver and get out. Merging back into traffic, the driver heads for the onramp to the bridge that will take him to the upper-middle-class suburb of Muhandesin. As he approaches the ramp, the voice on the tape is asking, "How will you feel when the grave closes tightly around you from all of the evil deeds you have done?" The bass line to a Michael Jackson hit sweeps in from the open window of a passing car and quickly fades away. "C'mon shaykh, get to the three questions," the driver implores as he accelerates, anxious for the scene of divine interrogation that he knows from experience will soon arrive. Heading over the bridge, he is still listening.

*From Charles Hirschkind, The Ethical  
Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic  
Counterpublics (2006)*

A sound walk affords a particular kind of listening pleasure, that of discovering sounds on the move, sensing the as-yet mysterious borders of new sound phenomena as they come into our range of hearing, overlap with and eventually replace those we have previously encountered and recognized. In this sense, movement through a space has the potential to make our hearing more dynamic, letting it function like a multi-track mixing board, mapping the shifting acoustic space between the nearby and the far off, the already heard and the not yet audible, blending the frequencies and timbres of different noises and perhaps uncovering ghost harmonics in their intervals, bringing up certain sounds as we approach their sources, fading out others as we leave them in our wake. What makes such an experience more or less engaging is, on one hand, the heterogeneity of the sounds we encounter and, on the other, the porosity of the sonic environment, a porosity that is perhaps shared by the listener who, attracted to and invaded by odd sound events, might experience a kind of drift to the membranous borders of their own subjective awareness.

Sonic heterogeneity, it could be said, depends to a large extent on how far the area in question is able to accommodate different forms of life, rhythms of work or play, languages, modes of behaviour and types of activity, both human and non-human. Porosity is a question of the openness of the sound field, the extent to which these elements are, or become, present to, and perhaps even through, each other, which can also be an indicator of the relative "openness" of the neighbourhood.. Both factors contribute to what we might call an idiorrhhythmic mode of listening and of traversing an environment. By this we mean a form of auditory attention that attributes value and meaning to the play of rhythmic differences, both macro and micro, encountered in the sound field, whether synchronic or diachronic and at whatever level of audibility. The more open windows there are on the route, the richer and more varied this sonic texture tends to be.

As a model for social coexistence, idiorrhhythmy seems to carry within it a danger of fragmentation into atomised individualism. A key question is the extent to which members of such a community become absorbed in the particular rhythm of their own activity and its expression to the exclusion of all others. Listening, in our view, might play an important role in conceiving an idiorrhhythmic sociality in which people engaged in a particular activity can become more aware of and affected by rhythms outside and different to those of their own sphere.

The voice is bearer of meaning when espoused with speech as opposed to uttering of noise or sounds... While its influence operates on a political level, perhaps even as deity, it is also a concretization of presence.

The sonority (the voice) is widely depicted as an elusive substance, its amorphous nature allows it to occupy a given space, to inhabit our ears without really allowing the listener to fully grasp it. It shapes the contours of space. In parallel to sound, the voice acts like melody in that the listener follows, as if hypnotized, to its articulations.

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To listen to sound is not the same as listening to music. They both entail other forms of understanding and necessitate different approaches in order to engage with them. Listening strains towards a possible meaning, but it is also a manifestation of intensification. It amplifies the sensation of anxiety, manifests the excitement of the ear towards the spreading of sound. This intensification need not impose planning or expectancy rather it is the subject that seeks to pursue the meaning of both resonance.... and sense simultaneously, at the instant of sound's appearance.

*From Rayya Badran, Radiophonic Voice(s)  
(2010)*

The acts of entrainment, and the dynamics of rhythm – from the step to the gait and finally, to the journey-form – leads to what I want to call the sonic body, as the effective dislocation and reconfiguration of the body under the mediating spell of a sonic event. That is, the body totally reconstructed according to the dynamics of listening and in search of a new city. The journey-form of the sonic body is an improvisation seeking out possible entrainment within the soundscape; to drum out, through the step and the gait, a progression ahead of or behind the mapped itinerary—a splinter, a fragment, a dislocated center. The sonic body as step-by-step journey-form, whose walk rubs against the patterning of urban systems, and the ebb and flow of exchange, to perform an orchestration of emotional matter – of the psychodynamics of being in place and already somewhere else.

*Brandon Labelle, Acoustic Territories: Sound  
Culture and Everyday Life (2010)*

LECTURE ON NOTHING

I am here , and there is nothing to say .  
 those who wish to get somewhere , If among you are  
 any moment . What we re-quire is  
 silence ; but what silence requires  
 is that I go on talking .  
 Give any one thought  
 a push : it falls down easily .  
 ; but the pusher and the pushed pro-duce that enter-  
 tainment called a dis-cussion .  
 Shall we have one later ?

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Or , we could simply de-cide not to have a dis-  
 cussion . What ever you like . But  
 now there are silences and the  
 words make help make the  
 silences .

I have nothing to say

and I am saying it and that is  
 poetry as I need it .

is organized

This space of time  
 We need not fear these silences, —

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For me, [unlearning listening] occurred when I participated in a performance of 4'33" by John Cage, a piece in which a full orchestra sits silent on stage for 4 minutes and 33 seconds. Usually, when this piece is performed, both audience and musicians say they begin after a time to hear all sorts of ambient sounds, the movements of people in the hall, or noises coming from outside. For me, this period of listening had a different effect. I wanted to break the silence -- that is, to rebel against Cage's "demonstration," to transgress the discipline of pure listening. So did my stand partner. We did. We "ruined" the piece by playing an open C string at 4'02 and an open G string at 4'13". It was enormously satisfying. So I unlearned the sanctity of a musical score, the authority of a musical commandment. Would Cage have been furious? Probably, but he shouldn't have been: every transgression invites a further transgression.

*Richard Sennett (2017)*

We are giving attention to more than one flow of sound, in parallel or simultaneously, as well as discerning the direction and context. For example, attending to a conversation, music and external sounds that are cues for something to happen, like a siren or telephone, without breaking any flow. Readiness to listen is always present when engaged in listening.

*Pauline Oliveros, Deep Listening -  
A Composer's Sound Practice (2005)*

Not only do we need to revise our understandings of discursivity and site specificity, but we also need to devise and demonstrate an alternate model of listening. Such a model would locate the sonic work in the dispersed site of what is sometimes called the "extra-musical," that is: additional forces, influences, and relationships that license the motivations, structures, and meanings of the composition. These considerations extend listening to include a broad inventory of concerns and conditions: tradition, expectation, convention, gadgets, subjectivity, institution, and history.

Acting on what was at first a flippant impulse, but now seems increasingly meaningful, I will call this model "shallow listening," in contradistinction to Pauline Oliveros's notion of "deep listening." Deep listening suggests something to be quarried, something at the bottom, a bedrock, an ore, a materiality that contains riches. Oliveros, working along Cagean lines, imagines that sounds-in-themselves are deeply valuable entities, imbued with eternally rewarding sensual and experiential qualities. Imagine the same volume of listening attention. But instead of condensing it within a concentrated, narrow-gauge bandwidth, shallow listening pools at the surface, spreading out to encompass adjacent concerns and influences that the tunnel vision of the deep model would exclude.

*Seth Kim-Cohen, No Depth: A Call for Shallow Listening (in Against Ambience and Other Essays, New York, Bloomsbury) (2016, p. 134)*

Exercises in microsonic listening — neither dramatic nor particularly impressive to anybody other than the recipient — can be discounted or forgotten so easily, or deflected in the need to move quickly, achieve, extract the maximum from being alive. In fact, they can ground us in the sense of being in the moment, open us to a form of concentrated attention, are essential for developing skills in the habit of listening to peripheral and subliminal sounds, all of which is a lesson in becoming aware of how strong feelings emerge in relation to barely noticeable elements within an environment.

*David Toop, Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener (2011)*

Guernica: Ben Ratliff, a New York Times music critic, has just released a book subtitled *Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty*. He wants to do away with genres of music, and focus instead on categories of listening, like repetition, slowness, and density. What chapter would you add?

Vijay Iyer: I'm not going to add a chapter to his book. My concern with this approach is that music becomes a substance devoid of people. It's a consumer model of what music is: subjects listening to objects. For me, music is subjects listening to subjects. It's about intersubjectivity. What I've learned from my gurus is that when you hear music, you hear a person, or you hear people, and you hear everything about them in those moments. They reveal themselves in ways that cannot be revealed any other way, and it contains historical truths because of that. To me, that is the most important thing. It shouldn't be a footnote, or the last chapter. It should be the complete thesis about a book on listening.

*Vijay Iyer, Beyond Objects, Beyond Scores (Guernica Magazine Interview) (2016)*

It seems a necessity, as “active listeners”, to become sensitive to these things in the world around us that the German poet Rilke called “inconsiderable things” (the things from everyday life that most people don’t really pay sensitive attention to). Standing on a street corner, listening to the sounds of cars approaching and then passing, the repeating crescendos resemble the sounds of ocean waves or the patterns of gentle breezes.

These sounds do not only move around us; but also through us; and with sensitive ears, we begin to hear the world differently. We determine the possibilities of such “everyday” sounds for ourselves, and depending upon the depth of our attention to them, all sounds have the potential to evoke profound experiences through them. Rilke also said once that “hands must be gentle to accept the offering” - and I would like to propose that gentle ears and active listening can enable one to have a deeper connection to the spaces and the sounds that surround them - like Alice’s rabbit hole; one must take notice of certain things, before one can fall into other worlds...

*Steve Roden, Active Listening (in Long Beach Sound Festival Catalogue) (2005)*

Continue, don’t run out of breath. Your body is not the same today as yesterday. Your body remembers. You don’t need to remember, to store up yesterday like capital in your head. Your memory? Your body reveals yesterday in what it wants today. If you think: yesterday I was, tomorrow I will be, you are thinking: I have died a little. Be what you are becoming, without clinging to what you could have been, might be. Never settle. Let’s leave definitiveness to the undecided; we don’t need it. Right here and now, our body give us a very different certainty. [...] You are moving. You never stay still. You never stay. You never “are”. How can I say you, who are always other? How can I speak you, who remain in a flux that never congeals or solidifies? How can this current pass into words? It is multiple, devoid of “causes” and “meanings”, simple qualities; yet it is not decomposable. These movements can’t be described as the passage from a beginning to the end. These streams don’t flow into one, definite sea; these rivers have no permanent banks; this body no fixed borders. This unceasing mobility, this life.

*Luce Irigaray, When our Lips Speak Together (transl Carolyn Burke)*

We have already noted, in the previous chapter, how the musical event of the present is a steady state tone or tonal complex occupying a temporal space of finite duration. One way of conceptualizing a piece of music is thus as a series of events of the present, each one succeeding the previous one in an orderly series, rather like beads on a string. From the point of view of the listener, however, the basic event of the present is not the basic perceptual unit, so the conceptualization is a bad one. A listener does not hear a series of discrete events. He hears whole phrases, recognizes entire tunes, becomes aware of particular patterns, and in general spends his time in perceptual tasks which involve the grouping together of the separate events... The all-important emotional response to music occurs as a consequence of events of the future. By contrast, the event of the present is always an isolated tonal element, looking neither backwards or forwards. It only has meaning once it becomes part of the past; in other words, paradoxically, perception of a tune involves memory. The basic problem is therefore to find out how events of the past come to take on such crucial importance in music, and to explain why they have the effects that they sometimes do.

*John Booth Davies, The Psychology  
of Music (1978)*

The voices of the past are especially lost to us. The world of unrecorded sound is reclaimable, so the disjunction that separates our ears from what people heard in the past are doubly profound. I can see evangelist George Whitefield's crossed eyes in a portrait; I can still see some of the pulpits from which he preached; I can pore over his sermons; I can read his journals. But I can never lend him my ears or eavesdrop on his prayers. Almost all of history is eerily silent and so, to evoke those stilled and faded voices, the historian must act as a kind of necromancer. The historian's ventriloquy, like that of the Witch of Endor, allows the living to hear the dead. And that is the inevitable direction of travel: historians bring the past into the present, a conversation that when necessary rings with contemporary questions.

With the sense of hearing, the presence of the contemporary at the historian's table has created not only resonance but also an excess of clarity about the past. This is especially evident in two sprawling discourses about hearing's modern diminution, twin narrative structures of loss and absence that have taken on the aura of the universal. The first involves the eye's clear eclipse of the ear, the decline of listening in the face of the ascendant power of vision in modern culture. The second concerns the dwindling of hearing as a spiritual sense and the lost presence of divine speech – that is, the peculiar acoustic of modern forms of alienation, disillusionment, and secularism. Recognizing how the sense of hearing has been framed within the metanarratives of modernity is a prerequisite for a more historical narrative. It allows for acknowledgement of the universalized philosophical and religious inscriptions with which modern ears have been marked. The prisoners in Plato's cave, it is easily forgotten, were troubled not only by the flickering images but also by the echoes. What historians hear reflected back at them often proves to be little more than the sounds of their own tongues, but this particular treachery of knowledge is a reality to face, not efface.

*Leigh Eric Schmidt, Hearing Loss  
(in The Auditory Culture Reader) (2016)*

The referent for one's walks is not the simultaneity of a planned spatial whole but, rather, at each moment of the stroll, the coexistence of the different instantiated principles involved in everyday life. The explication, the development in movement of this coexistence, resembles a sort of creation, and through this creation the space into which one has gone takes on this or that quality, depending on the occasion, but no longer has any permanency of its own (except in representation and on maps). In summary, whether one sketches it on a map or sets it within the framework of a causal system, the practice of inhabiting as it is lived always escapes. Does one want to make it say something? It loses all consistency and fades away. It is apparent only in the extreme complexity of its ways of being, and it disappears in the face of all the "why" questions that are all too prompt to find causes for it. Perhaps what is then needed is to settle into the immediacy of the plurality of modes of inhabiting and to stay [séjourner] there for a sufficiently long time without knowing in advance if these modes are causes, effects, or something else. And one must choose the paths that would be likely to make inhabitant expression appear, that would grant it the time to recite its singularities, its minuscule day-to-day variations, its detours, and its delays. It would be necessary, in short, to postpone for some time the repetition of our "why" questions and to give free rein to the "how"...

*Jean-Francois Augoyard, Step by Step: Everyday Walks in a French Urban Housing Project*

Noise therefore can refer to three different forms of diminished auditory clarity: first, noise can be conceived as sound, which elicits a negative response. Evidence for this form of noise comes primarily from literary sources (Horace, Martial, Juvenal or Seneca being the most cited). This is a reactive response to sound and categorical in definition (like/dislike). Second, noise can be conceived as sound that obscures auditory clarity, such as an AC unit in an office. This form of noise is referred to as background noise and functions as an agent within the environment. Evidence for these types of noise can come from material remains, including wheels, shoes, or hooves, as well as construction materials or forms of paving. This is not a reactive response to sounds, but noise as an active agent. Acoustics, in this context of noise, becomes important as the measure of potential influence of architecture on noise. Finally, noise can be conceived of as unknown or unrecognised sound, as not-yet-meaningful sound. This is noise in a non-pejorative sense, or noise as the periphery of knowledgeable sound.

*Jeff Veitch, Mithraic Noise (2017)*