

# Ordering of Sounds: The Homogenization of Listening in the Age of Globalized Soundscapes

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## Introduction

In 1977, Canadian pianist Glenn Gould produced *The Quiet in the Land* for CBC radio—a one-hour documentary on Mennonite life in and around Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario and Winnipeg, Manitoba based on interviews and vocal soundscapes. In it he applied his polyphonous audio aesthetic of “contrapuntal radio,” mixing materials in a way considered an absolute no-go for a professional broadcaster: spoken word mixed with spoken word. For listeners this created a new experience; in contrast to their long-time radio listening habits, they would soon get lost in a mélange of unidentifiable words dissolving into mere sound. Gould subordinated his interview materials to the compositional principles of a fugue, which work on sonic, not semantic, patterns. The characteristic voices of his interviewees can be followed by their pitch, their intonation, or their sentence melody, but only vaguely by their content. Even today, *The Quiet in the Land* is considered a challenging production, forming an enlightening frame around the topic of worldwide homogenization in urban soundscapes and ways of listening. It is this homogenization that I will explore in this paper.

## Senses and Society

“The *forming* of the five senses is a labour by the entire history of the world down to the present,” Karl Marx wrote in 1844. “The [human] senses caught up in crude practical need have only a *restricted* sense.”<sup>1</sup> Here Marx implies that a community’s economic and social forms of organization define people’s senses and therefore also form their interests, objects, and methods of perception. These interests and perceptions adapt themselves according to the core values of the dominant societal system and are shaped within a

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, tr. Martin Milligan (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2007), 108-109.

capitalist society mainly by the values of possession and ownership. “In place of *all* these physical and mental senses there has therefore come ... the sense of *having*,”<sup>2</sup> Marx adds.

Throughout their writings, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels extensively describe the sensory deprivations that members of the working class had to endure in order to function in the production process. These included heat, dust, blinding brightness, painful body postures and repetitive gestures, filth, stench, bad food, and, last but not least, noise. All these privations overwhelmed, numbed, coarsened, and mutilated their senses and organs of perception, which meant that the masses of workers rarely, if ever, had the chance to access without hindrance the range of possibilities that their senses and minds were capable of experiencing. Following Marx, we may say that various societal conditions also form auditory realities and create specific sonic environments. Soundscapes from today’s consumer capitalism do not bear the same massive noises as the gigantic machinery of the 19th and early 20th century. However, these capitalistic consumer-society soundscapes obviously cannot keep up with the aesthetic sophistication of their visual environments. Induced by commodification, product and graphic design, architecture and fashion have created highly aestheticized everyday visual surroundings, but the soundscapes remain shapeless, insignificant and, often enough, ugly beyond any concern of design.

### **Conformation and Equalization of Urban Soundscapes**

At various symposia during the last two years, I have presented soundscape recordings of rush hours from megacities as diverse as Riga (Latvia), Frankfurt, Chicago, Singapore, and Sao Paolo. All the soundscapes were recorded in the same way—from the perspective of a pedestrian standing alongside a busy street, in the exact same way as the majority of urban dwellers constantly experience their living environments. It is important to note here that my topic is the habitual experience of everyday routines, not the sophisticated hearing practices of an aesthetically and artistically oriented person.

On listening to the sounds of the recordings, not a single audience member could identify any one of the recorded cities, not even its region or

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 106.

its cultural sphere. There were simply no significant, recognizable sounds. Each recording conveyed similar engine sounds made by the universally popular car brands covering up most of the environmental sounds unique to the area. Wind and bird sounds, sounds of inhabitants' footwear, and sounds of other human activities and conversations were subdued, leaving characteristic language traits undetected.

As well, I collected a number of soundscape recordings from shopping malls in London (England), Buenos Aires, Warsaw, and Bangkok. It was always the same kinds of pop songs that would blare from fashion shops and supermarket chains. The beeping of scanning cash registers, the tinny rattling of shopping carts, the whirring of air conditioner fans, the thrumming of escalators, the ringtones of cell phones, and the voices of countless humans would all get mixed up unidentifiably within the reverberant acoustics of malls all over the globe, all looking and sounding alike. Given these auditory impressions, the question "Where, exactly, am I?" turns out to be unanswerable.

Who of us can remember how Vietnam's capital, Hanoi, sounded in the mid-1990s when the soundscape was dominated by the gentle buzzing of thousands upon thousands of bicycles? Who remembers the mid-1980s soundscape of the South Indian industrial center Bangalore, with its broad, tree-fringed cinema boulevards, where an uncountable number of people expressed their movie-going enthusiasm with great vocal liveliness? These are but two examples, and I do not conjure them up in order to lose myself in nostalgia. However, the former soundscapes of these cities present striking illustrations of an acoustic identity of which barely anything is left today.

### **Acoustic Identity and Quality of Life**

Many people experience an everyday life soundscape as so specific and unmistakable that, on hearing it, they feel an intensification of the "here and now." With good reason they speak, for example, about their favorite place at the seaside, where the specific sounds of waves, wind, and water create an exceptional atmosphere. By contrast, a lack of acoustic identity means that we become less rooted when we cannot sense familiar atmospheres or be fascinated by sounds unique to individual locations. When urban soundscapes are exchangeable because car brands, popular music, and

*Arbeitsrhythmen* (work rhythms)<sup>3</sup> are similar or identical, the specificity of a place will inscribe itself less intensely into the mind and memory of local inhabitants. Our being able to identify unique and specific acoustic settings relates closely, therefore, to freedom from alienation.

### **Global Conformity of Soundscapes: Aesthetic Consequences**

Where production, management, and consumption take place according to similar principles, methods, and infrastructures, as well as with the same economic goals, there will be identical machinery noises, communication means, and traffic flow, resulting in analogous sound environments. Such an assimilation of soundscapes can be understood as the immaterial manifestation of a rampant, economic assimilation to which the term “globalization” is commonly applied. Aesthetic “equalization”<sup>4</sup> and its consequences, caused by a huge, all-encompassing, technologically and economically driven worldwide movement, became a prominent topic among some thinkers in the last century. For instance, psychiatrist-philosopher Karl Jaspers in the early 1930s was criticizing what he called “planetarization,” which homogenizes all aspects of life, especially as it minimizes the diversity of mindsets and perception, and changes human beings into mere functionaries within the economically and technically driven process of production and consumption.

Much later, in 2003, Canadian scholar David Howes explained the aesthetic consequences of globalization by describing changes in the sonic environment that lead to sensual simplification and audio-aesthetic impoverishment.<sup>5</sup> In his discussion, Howes cites anthropologist Steven Feld’s research in Papua New Guinea during the 1980s on the relationship between the natural rainforest soundscape and the singing and soundmaking of the Kaluli people. Today, their former acoustically-rich environment has been deforested and exploited commercially. Howes suggests that these changes have forced the Kaluli people to migrate to urban centers to enter the labor

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<sup>3</sup> The German term *Arbeitsrhythmen* refers to rhythms of one’s work schedule—the starting and stopping of a workday or work week, and the rhythm of intensity versus relaxation.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Karl Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* [The Spiritual Condition of the Age] (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1931), 74. Jaspers used the German term *Nivellierung*, “leveling out.”

<sup>5</sup> David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2003), 217.

force. Having been exposed to the sensual impressions of city life, many of these workers sought to engage in their new soundscape by abandoning their complex traditional vocalizations in favor of tepid, if popular, imitations of Australian string band music.<sup>6</sup> Their becoming part of the commercially driven globalization process crucially affected this dramatic shift of their auditory culture.

Some of the Kaluli underwent an adaptation process in order to function in the expanding world of industrial machinery, consumerism, and capitalist economy. This change of aesthetics is closely intertwined with changes in ethics, and bears significant societal consequences. In this case, once something had left an individual's sensorium, it ceased to exist and became difficult, perhaps almost impossible, to retrieve. An overall atrophy of sonic diversity results in the simplification not only of urban soundscapes but of auditory perception and production.

Apart from Marx's political-economic ideals, it is the structure of Marx's argument that is interesting here. His ideas were shaped by Montesquieu's milieu theory and Kant's rejection of a "pure intuition," later elaborated further by such thinkers as Freud, Walter Benjamin, Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Marshall McLuhan, Felix Guattari and Gene Youngblood, and providing a straight line to practitioners such as physiotherapist Moshe Feldenkrais and sonic researcher, composer, and educator R. Murray Schafer.

In *The Tuning of the World*, Schafer elaborates on the aesthetic consequences of the disappearance of acoustic identity.<sup>7</sup> To do this, he reconstructs and describes changes in soundscapes—from the rural ancient Greek environment to the Industrial Revolution and finally to the Electric Revolution—relating these changes to the changes of hearing methods and practices, and to the role of listening in the respective societies. Schafer explores the idea that society's lack of ability and willingness to listen originates from many undifferentiated, unintentional, and unattractive soundscapes to which people are increasingly subjected and which have made listening generally irrelevant in daily perceptual practice.<sup>8</sup> According to Schafer, soundscapes not only represent natural, cultural, and technological objects

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4.

and phenomena but also allow us to draw conclusions about a society's priorities, deficiencies, and power structures. The implied consequence is a hierarchization of societal values, causing auditory impositions on individuals. These values shape both the sounds reaching our ears and the manner in which we perceive them. These globally conforming economic and industrial structures generate and disseminate specific value systems causing relatively equalized soundscapes worldwide.

### **Ordering of Sounds and Role of Audio Media**

These conformed soundscapes not only define the objects of listening but also the methods whereby we listen to the world around us. Schafer's approach implies that the existing structures and shapes of the sonic environment to which members of a society are constantly exposed inscribe themselves as individual and social listening attitudes and patterns. They carve out and establish ways of listening, and they create listening habits. Within this context, Schafer assigns an important role to the spatial auditory awareness that he associates with the terms "lo-fi" and "hi-fi" soundscapes.<sup>9</sup> A hi-fi environment is a soundscape in which all sounds reach the ear clearly, both directionally and spatially specified, with distant and soft sounds reaching it. A lo-fi soundscape is characterized by a broadband wall of noise that allows a person only to perceive sounds within a limited radius. Because the audible horizon is narrowed, broadband noise masks all distant and soft sounds.

Lo-fi environments typically exist within urban soundscapes that contain constant car sounds, rattling air conditioners, or vibrating construction equipment. Also, a typical urban design pattern allows for block housing to be constructed along streets, making it almost impossible to listen to any sounds beyond street and city noises. This results in widespread listening habits that focus on strong foreground sounds while neglecting distant or low sounds. The corresponding urban sound typology and the resulting listening habits suggest that human listening patterns are socially configured so as to block out certain sounds.

These listening patterns are perpetuated by a globally pervasive audio media production aesthetic, found mainly in news or entertainment-oriented radio or TV programs, film soundtracks, and computer games.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 8.

This aesthetic reproduces urban listening experiences in as much as the succession of sounds is strongly condensed, and pauses or silence are rarely audible; the sounds are recorded only a short distance from the microphone, therefore appearing close to the ear; distant or low sounds are an exception; and space as a variable parameter of audio design plays an insignificant role. The experience we hear is reproduced by the experience we design, and vice versa.

The described production aesthetic also corresponds to the compression principles of the MP3 data format, which is based on the assumption that sound data can be reduced by eliminating auditory values deemed inaudible by the audio industry. These less prominent sounds are considered to be masked by other simultaneous sounds. Reduction and masking relate to a globalized urban soundscape typology, with the MP3 format allowing for an increased availability of sound that is easier to store, multiply, and disseminate. Thus, this format has led to a further simplification and commodification of sound. At the same time, the lo-fi soundscape orders sounds in such a way as to impose reductions on the audible world, helping listeners filter out distant or quieter sounds, and to exercise a clear distinction between “signal” and “noise.”

Glenn Gould’s *The Quiet in the Land* does just the contrary, by mixing spoken word with spoken word, and inviting listeners to appreciate all sounds, without ignoring the “noise.” This approach differs from one in which a succession of signals containing supposed significance are shaped, reduced, and condensed in order to direct the audience’s ear toward the recognizability of certain sounds. Gould’s aim was to reflect on the beliefs and practices of Mennonites who, at least in part, attempt to renounce a world dominated by machines, commercialization, and utilitarianism. Gould’s production aesthetic can be understood as a resistance against the homogenization of listening and the assimilation of ubiquitous mainstream priorities and values. Instead, *The Quiet in the Land* celebrates the autonomy of the human auditory sense beyond being directed and “made to listen.”

It is noteworthy that the only program slots in media where Gould’s type of production aesthetics can be produced and broadcast are found in certain cultural programs on public radio, especially in Europe, within certain documentaries and various forms of experimental music, all of

which contravene more conventional production aesthetics and ordering of sounds. Most networks which air these kinds of programs do not sell their airtime and have not yet surrendered completely to a commercialized hierarchy of values. Those broadcasting corporations which program non-commercial formats of music, documentaries, or radio art are in actuality resisting commodification, and therefore do not attend to “the sense of having,” which Marx formulated as the significant motivator of sensory appropriation.

### **Conclusion**

Some people believe that global conformity, in terms of acoustic identity, does not exist. For them, even the most stylish shopping mall or the most dense urban traffic scenario still contains specific, aesthetically interesting sounds that are uniquely identifiable. Indeed, there are artists who gain subtle auditory values from urban listening experiences, such as Pierre Henry in his radiogenic composition “La Ville”; Peter Cusack in his soundscape productions with materials from London, Berlin, and Beijing; or the late Steven Miller, who ran the audioblog “Sight Sounds Words.”<sup>10</sup> Miller documented, nearly daily, the soundscapes of large cities in which he lived with complex and poetic field recordings. These recordings do not reproduce the ordinary urban audio patterns that I described above. On the contrary, a different kind of listening emerges from them, which can be called *gestaltendes Hören* or “giving shape while listening” and which acts as a kind of countermovement.

To listen, even where one would expect not to hear anything worthwhile, breaks through the restrictions of collectively practiced routines and orthodoxies and explores ways of finding alternative listening perspectives. This can be done by making microphone adjustments, exploring new phases and rare moments of sonic activity, and listening for auditory shapes and forms that travel beyond the seemingly stable and expected ordering of the sounds. This kind of listening allows one to understand that there are concepts that can subvert the usual, homogenized auditory patterns and allow for expanded acoustic realities.

By fostering the development of creative and innovative sonic art

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<sup>10</sup> <https://sightssoundwords.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed January 15, 2015.



forms, we are led to ask how these new ways of listening can become more important to the larger society in which we live. If they lead us to deeper understandings and cognition about the world around us, is it not important that we recognize them? How can we be sure that listening will remain an act of freedom, enabling each listener to gain new perceptions rather than merely submitting to social conformity?

One important goal is to expand everyone's appreciation of the auditory in *all* situations of life and not to relegate it to music alone. This means not separating listening from everyday perception and not making listening relate only to cultural or artistic activities. This can be successfully achieved only if the sonic environment is deemed worthy of being listened to by strengthening its own acoustic identity. However, these measures can be developed only if listeners explore the possibilities of differentiated sonic perception. Aesthetic listening education is the key: such education has the freedom to question listening habits and economic utilitarianism, while integrating various categories of a learned musical art with the auditory perception of everyday life.<sup>11</sup>

Equally important is initiating and encouraging discourses that evaluate societal priorities regarding quality of life, communication patterns, autonomy, and health. As we become able to base a new ordering of sounds on our new understandings, and learn how to understand the roots of sonic problems, we can see more clearly that sound has political dimensions and is not merely an aesthetic experience.

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<sup>11</sup> To the best of my knowledge, this does not conform to the curricula of music education today. German schools, for instance, largely uphold traditional concepts of the musical ordering of sounds.