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## **The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies**

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### **Soundscape(S): The Turning of the Word**

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## 14

SOUNDSCAPE(S): THE TURNING  
OF THE WORD*John M. Picker*

The use of “soundscape” is so prevalent at this point in writings on sound and music, literature, art, history, media, identity, the environment, engineering, commerce, and travel—Jonathan Sterne calls it “the most enduring spatial figure in sound studies”—that it seems odd to pause to reflect on it (Sterne 2012: 91). Newbies to the field (you know who you are) likely have come across “soundscape” and perhaps even adopted it in their work, thinking its meaning was self-evident and stable and its connotations unremarkable. The purpose of this chapter is not entirely to disabuse anyone of these notions, since it is inevitable, as well as democratic, that niche vocabulary migrates from its local origins to more common parlance, and the progression of “soundscape” certainly follows that path. Rather, I intend to show that there is a longer history of soundscape than we might realize and to recount some of the ways soundscape has both evolved and stirred debate. For it is a term that, surprisingly to casual and even seasoned students of sound, has a habit of finding its way into new contexts and provoking strong responses. After reading this chapter, should you draw upon some version or variation of “soundscape” in your own writing or conversation about sonic matters, you should be able to do so better informed of its origins, development, and implications, and better prepared to engage with them if you so choose.

To begin with what might seem like an obvious starting point, the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers two definitions of “soundscape”: a) “a musical composition consisting of a texture of sounds,” and b) “the sounds which form an auditory environment.” The OED entry includes a handful of examples in print from 1968 through 1977, including *Time* magazine on Debussy’s soundscapes and the Victoria (BC) *Daily Colonist* on the World Soundscape Project. I’ll discuss the problems with this skimpy entry soon enough, but for now, to this basic framework we could add Canadian composer, writer, and music educator R. Murray Schafer’s definition in his influential *The Tuning of the World* (about which more later as well): “The soundscape is any acoustic field of study. We may speak of a musical composition as a soundscape, or a radio program as a soundscape or an acoustic environment as a soundscape” (Schafer 1994: 7). In Schafer’s rendering, “soundscape” comes to refer to “a total social concept to describe the field of sounds in a particular place, or an entire culture” (Sterne 2012: 91). Such a definition requires not only sound within space but also a listener in a position to hear it. As Steven Connor puts it, “a soundscape is a sound plus a certain kind of relation” (2014: 18).

That is adequate as far as it goes. But before turning to these more established connotations, or even the dictionary definitions, let's first take the word on its face. To many of us, "soundscape" initially comes across as a modern adaptation to the acoustic arena of the familiar term of pictorial art "landscape." Indeed, the earliest published use I have found of it, which predates the examples in the OED by over 60 years, suggests an origin as a term of art, a variation on "seascape," but for related topography. A 1907 article from *Harper's Weekly* concerns the political prospects of the now-forgotten playwright Augustus Thomas in a potential run for mayor of "New Rochelle, where he has long lived in a neighborhood which he dominates" (Anon. 1907: 724). We get this description of his intellectual milieu:

When THOMAS had a literary bent he had also a theological spasm, and he surrounded himself with congenial comrades at his "Home of the Innocent," at New Rochelle. ROBERT INGERSOLL was his religious instructor; DE WOLF HOPPER furnished the literary entertainment at his Sunday symposiums by reciting "Casey at the Bat"; KEMBLE drew the pictures on the dinner cards; EDWARD SIMMONS [the American impressionist] painted the Soundscape over the mantel, and imbued the atmosphere with anti-Concordian philosophy; the young BARRYMORES lent the attractions of the stage that was to be; JOHN FOX sang the negro melodies; and REMINGTON furnished his usual eulogy upon the "man on horseback."

(*"Personal and Pertinent"*: 724)

The setting of New Rochelle, on the Long Island Sound, suggests that the use of "Soundscape" here is meant to characterize a painting of a *geographic*, not an acoustic, sound. This is "soundscape" not as appropriation of "landscape" (that is, a sonic landscape) but as *visual homonym*. This is a sense that has been so eclipsed—*drowned out* would be the apt audible and fluid idiom—by post-war usage that this meaning, and the first few appearances I identify in this chapter, are entirely absent in the entry in the OED. To the OED entry we thus could add a third, obsolete meaning: *a painting or view of a geographic sound*. The word in its infancy, it appears, has less to do with the auditory realm, and more to do with the natural and cultural environment of late Gilded Age leisure and luxury.

The next appearance of "soundscape" that I have been able to trace occurs within a similar bourgeois and geographic context, as a neologism for the kind of sensory experience now easily accessible to the ultimate consumer, the automobile owner. This example surfaces in a 1911 article in the *Club Journal* of the American Automobile Association, on touring the Long Island Sound by car (curious that these two early occurrences reveal the New York region as the entry-point of "soundscape" into the lexicon):

In the village of Westchester you cross a bridge and swing into Fort Schuyler Road. The scenery down this little peninsula is really very charming, with the water of the Sound on both sides. There is something about a great body of water that never fails to fill a scene with life and beauty. The coast may be, and generally is, flat and monotonous, but the restless beat and unwearied energy of the sea, or its little brother, the Sound, always attracts one. You get plenty of these "Soundscapes," especially as you draw near to the attenuated point of the peninsula, where the road takes up most of the available land.

(Anon. 1911: 514)

The ostensible reference here is to the Sound as a visual phenomenon, but the significance of the *sound* of the Sound emerges here as well ("restless beat and unwearied energy"). Indeed,

this may be the first use of the word that implies what would later become more explicit: soundscape's negotiated relationship among space (especially spaces of the natural environment), mechanization, and a listening subject. The "Soundscapes" encountered on this tour reveal themselves via the symbol of modern space-conquering technology, the car, with the author's predictable obliviousness to the effects of autoroutes and traffic ("where the road takes up most of the available land") on the natural "life and beauty" he (or perhaps she) apparently values. At this early date, the position and impact of the consuming subject is secondary to the restless pursuit of those ultimate modern amenities, the spectacular view and its corollary, the perfect site for high-fidelity audition.

The same consumerist impulse provides the context for my final early instance of "soundscape," again in the sense absent from the OED and yet worth noting for the way it transfers the term to the Northwest coast of the US, not far from Vancouver where it will be resuscitated some decades later by Schafer and his colleagues. Natural space, consumption, and modern convenience coalesce once more, in a real estate listing from the 1944 *Seattle Times*:

#### UNRIVALED SOUNDSCAPE

5 Years old—One of those smart, squatty, rambling homes of hollow tile construction literally filled with big oblong plate glass windows, unobstructibly sweeping the main channel of Puget Sound for miles and miles. ("Real Estate": 20)

This is the language of advertising, with a riff on "landscape" to arrive at marketing terminology selling a slice of Puget Sound. "Just 20 minutes to city center, just five years old and just the finest value you will find for \$12,500. We've seen none better," the realtors add ("Real Estate": 20). The listing reveals how "soundscape," in this long-lost geographic sense, functions still not yet as primarily or self-evidently an auditory event, but increasingly within a capitalist economy as a consumable, spatial, experiential good: a house with a perfect view.

I have suggested ways that formative appearances of the word, though forgotten, pivot on soundscape's homonymic effect even as they hint at some of its later, more familiar uses. It's time to turn to those now. Beginning in the late '50s, propelled by the rise of the stereo era, which features new techniques to engineer and experience recorded and broadcast sound (Sterne 2013, 2015), "soundscape" returns, emanating post-war hipness on both sides of the Atlantic in discussions of radio drama and musical compositions and performances. A 1958 review of a BBC radio broadcast of Kleist's *Prince of Homburg* praises the producer's "soundscape of the field of Fehrbellin," which "presented a tremendous panorama to the mind's eye," while Hugh Kenner (who, like Schafer, was a student of Marshall McLuhan at the University of Toronto) invokes it in his 1961 discussion of Beckett's radio play *All That Fall*: "Yet even Mrs. Rooney is an illusion; all living is an illusion; the very animals whose ways have not changed since Arcady are merely so many baas and bleats, manifestly generated by the sound effects department. (Beckett has said that he would have preferred the approximations of human imitators to the BBC's painstaking illusion.) Pulsating in acoustic space, the soundscape asserts a provisional reality, at every instant richly springing forth and dying" (Walker 1958: 475; Kenner 1961: 171). This is soundscape as acoustic engineering for a radio audience, or what Neal Verma has called "audiopositioning" (Sterne 2015: 70).

The term continued to be used in conjunction with the visual arts and the ways that painterly techniques could represent the sonic, both figuratively and with respect to the spaces of the natural environment. The abstract expressionist and longtime director of the Cleveland Institute of Art Joseph McCullough, who had studied at Yale with Josef Albers, began painting one or more series of "sound-filled landscapes" titled *Soundscape* as early as 1955–56 (*Soundscape #340*

dates from 1958 [Welchans 2012: 5]). This is the first post-war reference to soundscape I have been able to locate; the use is meant to capture the abstract synesthetic representation of sonic experience. McCullough would become known for these works in the '60s, and exhibited at the beginning of the decade a *Soundscape* which, with his companion piece *Bells*, “conjure[d] the auditory and sensory suggestion of tinkling metal tones” (Anon. 1964: 6; Metzler: 17-E). Soundscape also came to be applied in a figurative painterly sense to music. In an essay on Duke Ellington, the English critic Burnett James considered European influences on jazz, and Ellington in particular, with reference to French painting. For James, there were two strands of musical impressionism: one that captured the play of light on an object, embodied in the music of Debussy, and the other, more relevant to Ellington, an “impressionism of mood” best represented by Delius, whose “introduction to *Appalachia* is an extraordinarily evocative natural soundscape” (James 1961).

James's use of the term captures a transition toward the first of the two definitions provided by the OED (once again, in a reference earlier than any cited there): “a musical composition consisting of a texture of sounds.” This sense of the term develops over the '60s, not only with respect to the ways that concert music begins to be characterized—so the eminent music critic Paul Hume, reviewing a 1964 performance of Mahler's Sixth by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, could note “the great, often strident brass fanfares that punctuate the farflung soundscape”—but also the ways that contemporary music comes to be conceived (Hume 1964: C9). The 1960s saw the emergence of what the composer Hildegard Westerkamp coined “soundscape composition,” a form of musical creation that “employed environmental sound recordings but broke with the European acousmatic school” represented by Pierre Schaeffer's *Musique concrète*: “Soundscape composition, while theorized as a musical style, put constraints on the manipulation of sound sources. Practitioners maintained that the link between source and recording be transparent; the location recorded had to remain recognizable to the listener” (Akiyama 2010: 54). Such projects, undertaken by Westerkamp and others associated with Vancouver's World Soundscape Project, fixed “environmental sound with the intention of denoting a particular place and time” (Akiyama 2010: 55).

I have discussed one, or really two, senses of “soundscape” that have taken us into the 1960s. This leaves the second OED definition, “the sounds which form an auditory environment,” the meaning that Schafer focused on and that has become so predominant in general use. Although it's a common presumption that Schafer coined the word, it predated his first use of it, as we've seen, by sixty years. Nor did he arrive at this second sense entirely on his own. Schafer was anticipated in his broad reconception of soundscape as an environmental term by at least two others: Buckminster Fuller and Michael Southworth (Sterne 2013, 2015). Fuller, the developer of the geodesic dome, advocate of the meme of “Spaceship Earth,” and prophetic huckster (W. Patrick McCray calls him, as if to echo Disney's imagineers, a “visioneer” [McCray 2016]) drew upon “soundscape” in an environmental sense in his 1964 keynote speech (published in 1966) for the National Conference on the Uses of Educational Media in the Teaching of Music. Fuller begins with a discussion of the theory of the “Epigenetic Landscape,” in which “life alters the landscape, then landscape alters the life” and “entropy and evolution are inherent.” From here he moves to the correlation between music and the pace of life: “When, in due course, man invented words and music he altered the soundscape and the soundscape altered man. The epigenetic evolution interacting progressively between humanity and his soundscape has been profound” (Fuller 1966: 52).

For Sterne, this is “the earliest [use] ... that casts *soundscape* as a total concept ... meant to denote the entire sonic field of humankind as it exists in dynamic relationship with nature” (Sterne 2013: 186). Schafer may or may not have heard or read this lecture, but as an innovative

music educator he would have been interested in its subject matter and certainly was a fan of Fuller, bringing him to Simon Fraser University in the late '60s to deliver a three-hour lecture (Schafer 2012: 96).

A more developed precursor to Schafer's notion of soundscape is that of the architect and urban planner Southworth, whose influence Schafer has acknowledged. Southworth's 1967 MIT Master's thesis, "The Sonic Environment of Cities," was a pioneering analysis of the potential for reformation of the urban soundscape, with a focus on a field study of central Boston. Southworth's thesis is remarkable for the ways it lays out in nascent forms several of the concerns, concepts, and approaches that Schafer and his colleagues would develop, even including the equivalent of a sound map or sound walk. Both in his thesis and the 1969 article based on it, Southworth frequently uses "soundscape," without comment, as synonymous with "sonic environment." Southworth apparently had the idea to adapt his supervisor's term "cityscape" to a new urbanist approach that would consider the ways that city sound could better serve its inhabitants (Sterne 2015: 70). Southworth's goals "to reduce and control noise" and "to increase the informativeness of the soundscape" likely struck a chord with Schafer, who cites the article and reprints the sound map from it in *The Tuning of the World* and admits in his autobiography that he may well have borrowed the term from Southworth: "This is entirely possible; I read the article" (Southworth 1969: 69–70; Schafer 2012: 120).

Schafer's "soundscape" had some precedent, then, in the work of related scholars and public figures, but it was his role to begin to flesh out a theory and practice of acoustic design via the term, for which he became its greatest publicist. As Schafer put it, "it was the research I was beginning to develop that defined the term and brought it to international attention" (Schafer 2012: 120). It's important to recognize that Schafer's conception of soundscape emerges out of his work as a music educator in the '60s. "Soundscape" is a term whose function is pedagogical, as instruction to experience the world differently. Schafer's earliest uses appear in publications like *Ear Cleaning* (1967) and *The New Soundscape* (1969), pamphlets that were intended to assist teachers looking to revitalize what he perceived of as basic music pedagogy that had stagnated in the face of more vibrant countercultural trends epitomized by John Cage. Cage's influence was profound, both on Schafer and his conception of soundscape. Early in *The New Soundscape*, Schafer asks his students to define music. Facing the difficulty of doing so, he writes:

I did not like to think that the question of defining the subject to which we are devoting our lives was totally impossible. I did not think John Cage would think so either, and so I wrote him and asked him for his definition of music. His reply: *Music is sounds, sounds around us whether we're in or out of concert halls—see Thoreau.*

(Schafer 1986: 94)

Schafer's Cagean thinking brought avant-garde concepts and practices into the classroom and shaped his own thinking about soundscape. Furthermore, the effects of Cage's (and behind it, Thoreau's) koan-like writing—epitomized by Cage's single-sentence reply in this passage—are equally felt in Schafer's style.

"The whole world is an airport," Schafer quips in epigrammatic, Cagean mode, and this points to a central context for his soundscape efforts (Schafer 1986: 156). They are of a piece with the growing environmental concerns and fears of the social movements of the '60s. Schafer would recall,

I was beginning to research a new subject which I called the *soundscape*. The sounds of the environment were changing rapidly and it seemed that no one was documenting



the changes. Where were the museums for disappearing sounds? What was the effect of new sounds on human behavior and health? So many questions could be asked for which there were no answers in 1970.

(Schafer 2012: 119–120)

The archiving impulse mentioned here links back at least to the beginnings of ethnographic recording, one of the earliest uses to which sound recording technology was put in the late nineteenth century, but another motivation is even older, dating back in pre-industrial form to the eighteenth century if not even earlier. This was the need to find ways to manage unwanted, primarily urban sound, the problem that, in the wake of post-war environmentalism and massive over-industrialization had by 1970 come to be called *noise pollution*. Schafer the composer presents his sense of soundscape as a form of empowerment against a decomposed or degenerated acoustic environment. Schafer's response to undesirable sound is to encourage cultivating what he believes is desirable sound, which is to say, acoustic design:

It would seem that the world soundscape has reached an apex of vulgarity in our time, and many experts have predicted universal deafness as the ultimate consequence unless the problem can be brought quickly under control ... The final question will be: is the soundscape of the world an indeterminate composition over which we have no control, or are *we* its composers and performers, responsible for giving it form and beauty?

(Schafer 1994: 3, 5)

With such language as “vulgarity,” “form,” and “beauty,” it becomes clear that *The Tuning of the World* is a treatise on not merely the problem of noise, but also, more fundamentally, “aesthetic control of the acoustic environment” (Adams 1983: 44; my emphasis). Schafer's terminology reflects this aesthetic impulse, adapting words from visual regimes, sound reproduction media, and psychology into memorable, if problematic, neologisms in order to delineate and deconstruct the sonic environment. Among these, from “landscape” he analogizes (though does not coin) *soundscape* (“we can isolate an acoustic environment as a field of study just as we can study the characteristics of a given landscape” [1994: 7]); from “eyewitness,” he derives *earwitness* as the individual who can testify to a sound that they have heard; “landmark” yields *soundmark*; “clairvoyance” leads to *clairaudience*, or clear hearing; he characterizes environments as *hi-fi*, in which natural and community sounds can be heard clearly, and *lo-fi*, in which industrialization has led to noise and lack of clarity; and he introduces *schizophonia*, a “nervous” word meant to convey not only acousmatic, mechanically-reproduced sound separated from its source but also the “aberrational effect of this twentieth-century development” (Schafer 1994: 273).

That word choice of “aberrational” is a reminder that aesthetic judgments and invocations are everywhere in Schafer's concept of soundscape. This includes his points of reference, which are not typical in a book about noise pollution, let alone acoustics. Schafer's biography understandably emphasizes his work as a composer, which has obvious bearing on his project of conceiving the sounds of the environment as a composition, but less frequently noted is his significant background in literary studies, including a monograph on E.T.A. Hoffmann and music, and a formative edition of the complete music criticism of Ezra Pound. Schafer's soundscape is as much a product of literary engagement as it is of environmental or musical encounters. *The Tuning of the World* opens with an epigraph from Whitman and makes reference to a who's who of canonical and quasi-canonical writers, not only Pound and Hoffmann but also Remarque, Faulkner, Thoreau, Cooper, Maugham, Mann, Paton, Hugo, Heine, Tolstoy, Woolf, Dickens, Twain, and Wharton. The World Soundscape Project Schafer established in the early '70s included among

its investigations “a glossary of all unusual sounds encountered in world literature” (Schafer 2012: 120). A contemporaneous unpublished letter Schafer sent with a copy of *The Tuning of the World* to the literary critic (and fellow *enfant terrible*) George Steiner reads in part:

I am hoping that the TUNING might serve to move your mind towards a consideration of what I regard as a fertile theme for research: the soundscape in literature. I have charged at it in the opening chapters of the book, probably in too generalized a manner and quite without the equipment of the literary critic. I am fully aware that the quotes from literature which we have in our cross-indexed card file ignore the social and psychological contexts in which the acoustic descriptions occurred. Also, our card file is by no means as exhaustive or detailed as we would like. But the theme of soundscape studies is quite a bit broader than “sounds in literature” and I hope at least that I’ve been able to announce it without too many stupidities.

*(Letter to Steiner, 12 June 1977)*

“I have no specific plans to do what I am about to suggest,” Schafer adds before proposing that Steiner edit or write “a collection of essays (perhaps by different authors) dealing with aspects of the literary soundscape.” A response from Steiner appears not to have been forthcoming. Indeed, it would take years for more than a very few literary scholars, Western-focused or otherwise, to recognize the relevance of Schafer’s work to their own and explore and establish the significance of the ways that fiction, poetry, and drama render and recreate soundscapes of different eras and communities (for a notable recent example, see Jordan 2016).<sup>1</sup>

The wide range of reference, not only to Western texts but Eastern ones as well, can help partly to explain the book’s broader appeal and the consequent popularization of the notion of soundscape, but a further dimension that tends to be overlooked is the book’s publication history. *The Tuning of the World* began as a trade book (Knopf) reviewed in the likes of the *New York Times*, was paperbacked in 1980 with an academic publisher (the University of Pennsylvania Press) and a subtitle to clarify the aesthetic objective (*Toward a Theory of Soundscape Design*), and republished over a decade later with Destiny Books, an imprint of Inner Traditions, a press specializing in New Age mysticism, the occult, and self-help, again with a revised title, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, where it remains in print. Steven Connor suggests that the retitling of the book indicates the widespread success of “soundscape” as an operative term by the early ’90s: giving the book this title “means that the book itself was now itself conceivable as a kind of soundscape—that is, a certain gathering-together or taking-to-be of the whole field of modern sound that may itself count as a kind of soundscape” (Connor 2014: 17). More than this, the continual shifts in publisher and title indicate the elusive nature of the soundscape concept, especially as it migrated from Schafer’s text into the wider world.

As if to push back against its omnipresence as well as its slipperiness, some prominent scholars and sound artists have expressed their dissatisfaction with soundscape and proposed other terms as supplements or replacements. Steven Feld speaks for many when he objects to the ways that Schafer’s soundscape betrays a visualist bias in its approach and terminology; Feld prefers “acoustemology,” in part because it “refuses to sonically analogize or appropriate ‘landscape,’ with all its physical distance from agency and perception” (Feld 2015: 15). Acknowledging the earliest mentions of the word as a visual homonym, as I did at the outset of this chapter, grant the charge of visualist bias a different dimension, though no less weight. Tim Ingold claims that soundscape “has outlived its usefulness” and should be abandoned, since “the environment that we experience, know and move around in is not sliced up along the lines of the sensory pathways by which we enter into it” (Ingold 2007: 10). For Ingold and others, soundscape does not do justice



to the experience of being in the world: “our metaphors for describing auditory space should be derived not from landscape studies but from meteorology” (Ingold 2007: 12). Stefan Helmreich concurs: “The soundscape is shadowed by an acoustemology of space as given and listener as both apart from the world and immersed in it” (Helmreich 2010: 10). In place of Schafer’s and soundscape’s *immersion*, Helmreich offers “transduction” and “transductive ethnography” as more useful concepts for approaches such as his own, one attentive to underwater sound.

For certain scholars, Schafer’s soundscape is a product of “a somewhat romantic materialist environmentalism” and as such is premised on the “assumption that sound is only a matter of the vibrations of the source, leaving undertheorized the social, ideological, or political positionalities of listeners” (Samuels et al., 2010: 331, 335). The absence of awareness of the listener’s politics and space is echoed in Jonathan Sterne’s critique, which sees the “essence” of soundscape as “a stable audioposition, one from which the entire world is available to be heard.” For Sterne, Schafer’s soundscape is “a historical artifact of hi-fi culture,” and as such it “hides the work of shaping perspective” that it shares with the multichannel audio technologies of the post-war era (Sterne 2015: 79, 80). Sterne suggests that the soundscape obscures its own subjectivity. What is more, it has deluded us all: “What if we used the soundscape concept to build a metaphorical ‘world record collection’ to behold, while wearing our metaphorical smoking jackets in our mental living rooms, with ‘world pictures’ hung prominently on the walls, and we didn’t even know it?” (Sterne 2015: 81).

Schafer’s soundscape has found its way into the thinking of social geographers, though here too not always comfortably. Pioneering Finnish geographer J. G. Granö anticipated the soundscape concept by several decades (without using the term) in his *Pure Geography* (1929). He developed a system of “proximics,” in which he delineated “auditory phenomena” as part of the “medium,” or surround, within the “proximity,” the part of the environment perceivable by the senses. Granö even divided proximities between “natural” ones (waves, wind, birdsound) and “artificial” ones (voices, traffic, industry): Schafer’s hi-fi and lo-fi soundscape *avant* both *la lettre* and the language of multichannel audio. More contemporary geographers have found in the Schaferian soundscape a valuable correlation with Granö’s ideas and advocated for greater awareness of sound or more attention to improving sonic environments in geographic study (Smith 1994; Porteous 1990). However, arguing for the value of “auditory geography,” Paul Rodaway claims that “there is a tension” in Schafer’s use of soundscape between the soundscape as an aesthetic object and as an auditory experience, “a process of engagement” (Rodaway 1994: 86). Soundscape, for Rodaway, is “deceptively attractive” because it implies a static object and detached listener in a privileged position, while “auditory experience is far more dynamic and the sentient participates within the sonic environment” (Rodaway 1994: 86). Rodaway suggests that soundscape and Schafer’s related terms are useful, but only to a point: “its metaphorical basis reminds us of the limitations of language” and “the complex relationships between the different senses” (Rodaway 1994: 89).

Among historians, some have downplayed Schafer’s work even as they reconstruct past soundscapes, while others who use Schafer’s term make implicit nods to the kinds of problems Sterne and Rodaway identify. Alain Corbin writes alongside but without citing Schafer in his pioneering history of what he calls the nineteenth-century French “paysage sonore” (even though this phrase has been widely recognized as the French for “soundscape,” the English translation of Corbin’s book elides this phrase in the subtitle, and elsewhere in the text renders it as “auditory landscape”), in particular its “sonorités campanaires” [campanarian sonorities] (Corbin 1994, 1998; Schafer 2010). Following Corbin while reintegrating Schafer, Emily Thompson defines soundscape “as an auditory or aural landscape,” but she goes on to redirect the term away from Schafer’s anti-noise aesthetic to the rise of a modern constructed sonic environment that, at the

level of signals, is manipulated by architectural acousticians: “The physical aspects of a soundscape consist not only of the sounds themselves, the waves of acoustical energy permeating the atmosphere in which people live, but also the material objects that create, and sometimes destroy these sounds. ... A soundscape, like a landscape, ultimately has more to do with civilization than with nature, and as such, it is constantly under construction and always undergoing change” (Thompson 2002: 1–2). The title of my own book of literary and cultural history, *Victorian Soundscapes* (2003), nods to Schafer even as it offers subtle revision. My title, and my approach in the book, deviate from Schafer’s *The Soundscape* and its echoes in other singular “Soundscape” titles to capture the ways in which sonic environments in an era defined by urbanization, industrialization, and the birth of modern sound media are in their essence subjective, value-laden, and contested—multiple sensory experiences instead of a singular one. I analyze Victorian writers’ experience and expectations of sound with the understanding that it is largely written records, with all their partiality, that constitute “Victorian soundscapes.” Other recent titles that explore sites of historical fissure and ideological conflict, such as Karin Bijsterveld’s *Soundscapes of the Urban Past* (2013) and Carolyn Birdsall’s *Nazi Soundscapes* (2012), follow suit, recognizing the value of plural “soundscapes” in the vocabulary of apprehension (in both senses) of past experiences.

At present, we find “soundscape,” and soundscapes, everywhere: not only analyzed by academics but also deliberated in international bodies, reconstituted into artistic works and museum exhibits, even bought and sold as meditation and sleep-inducing digital downloads. In 2014, in response to the concern that the use of the term had become “idiosyncratic and ambiguous,” the International Standards Organization formalized the definition of soundscape for the purposes of measuring, reporting, planning, and management (ISO 12913-1: v). Their definition emphasizes human perception: the ISO differentiates between the “acoustic environment,” which is “sound at the receiver from all sound sources as modified by the environment,” and the soundscape, which is the “acoustic environment as perceived or experienced and/or understood by a person or people, in context” (ISO 12913-1: 2; see Figure 14.1).

The ISO efforts are an attempt to render soundscape practical and useful as an applied tool in soundscape ecology and other areas where the preservation and management of sound is paramount (Truax 1978). It is perhaps less of a stretch than it might initially seem to link their notion of soundscape to that of Mark Hagood (2011), who emphasizes the relationship between listeners, media, and power when he characterizes the work of noise-cancelling headphones

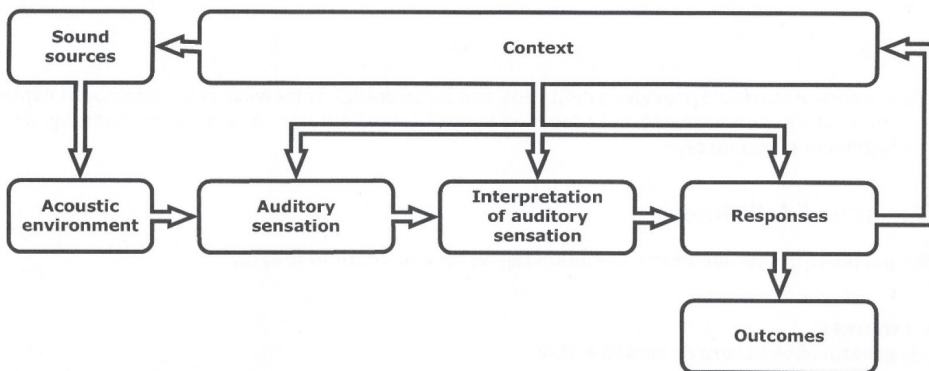


Figure 14.1 “Elements in the perceptual construct of soundscape.” ©ISO. This material is reproduced from ISO 12913-1:2014 with permission of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) on behalf of the International Organization for Standardization. All rights reserved.

worn by white business travelers as *soundscaping*. For Hagood, “soundscape” becomes a neoliberal verb, a way of enacting socioeconomic distinction within mobile personal space. With the ISO’s and Hagood’s meanings, we have come full circle from the first uses of “soundscape” over a hundred years ago. Each points to the ways that “soundscape” continues to be associated with the central position of the listener in the marking, and marketing, of space.

The arc I have traced in this chapter, from a singular soundscape to a plurality of soundscapes, reflects not just the spread of the word across disciplines and borders but also the multiplicity of meanings and perspectives the term has come to encompass. If this has induced excessive policing of discourse in some (Kelman 2010), others remain more at ease with the free movement of language to express the subjectivity of experience; for those in the latter camp (Bijsterveld 2013), there is the subtle recognition that “soundscapes” provides. As with any idea, no single writer, discipline, philosophy, or organization owns soundscape. Indeed, following Sterne, we might be inclined to think the concept has tended to own *us*. While aspiring students of sound should not feel compelled to adopt it, neither should they feel obliged to accept earlier definitions if they do. As I have shown, some of the most interesting work in the field has adapted the century-old term in the process of drawing attention to new perspectives on auditory history and culture.

### Note

- 1 I thank Murray Schafer for providing a copy of his letter to George Steiner. I also wish to acknowledge the broader influence on my thinking of Jonathan Sterne’s two recent overlapping essays on the history of soundscape, which I recommend to anyone with further interest in the subject.

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