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THE SONIC RHYTHMS OF PLACE

Tim Edensor

Walter Ruttmann's 1927 film, *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, set to a musical score, is an impressionistic portrayal of the passage of one day in the life in a large metropolis. Organized into five acts, the movie portrays the dynamic rhythms of the city: the dawn and start of the working day, the crescendo of the multiple rhythms of rush hours, the busy mobilities of passengers, pedestrians and vehicles, lunch-time, the rhythms of factory work and financial transactions, and the vigorous rhythms of nocturnal urban pleasures. What is striking about the film is that there are no recorded sounds, yet the musical score renders explicit the diverse, dynamic, sonic polyrhythms that occur throughout the day.

Henry Lefebvre underlines how places are dynamic settings, possessing no essence but ceaselessly (re)constituted out of the elements that flow from, to and across them. In his work on rhythmanalysis, Lefebvre considers that these vital qualities can be partly characterized by the multiple rhythms that produce this ongoing spatial fluidity. While these movements, pulses, and flows produce numerous ephemeral, contingent, and unpredictable moments, they also constitute a 'polyrhythmic ensemble' (Cragg, 2001) that reproduces regular patterns and consistencies, what Amin and Thrift call the 'repetitions and regularities that become the tracks to negotiate urban life' (2002: 17). Accordingly, one way in which we may discern the particularity of place is by identifying the multiple rhythms that range from those that are 'slow or fast, syncopated or continuous, interfering or distinct' (Lefebvre, 2004, 69), in addition to their combinations in 'bundles, bouquets, garlands of rhythms' (ibid, 20). Lefebvre thus insists that repetitive movements and actions, phases of growth and decline, and distinctively linear and cyclical rhythms, provide a backdrop to everyday life that is simultaneously usually stable but ever-changing: 'everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy, there is *rhythm*' (2004: 15).

Crucially, rhythms signify diverse temporal scales: those that resonate with epochal and geological time, life-cycles, annual and seasonal events, weekly routines and daily procedures, as well as those enmeshed in the human body (Edensor, 2010). The differently scaled rhythms of place are also produced by multiple agencies that include the non-human effects of weather, light, tidal patterns, and the daily, seasonal, and annual rhythms of animals and plants, growth, and decay. As far as social rhythms are concerned, regular cultural practices and institutionalised processes instantiate legal, conventional, and traditional pulses on place that include rhythms of trading and commerce, work and leisure, traffic and transport, and ritual and commemoration.

These are consolidated and supplemented by the co-ordinated routines of individuals who rhythmically align their daily and weekly practices with each other and in accordance with or at variance to these organized conventions and rules. The habits of individuals are thus sometimes disrupted or clash with collective rhythms but are more usually accommodated within them. Accordingly, this imbrication in the personal and collective rhythms of place as well as the non-human rhythms that flow across it produces a sense of belonging sedimented not only in habituated ways of culturally practising space and bestowing it with meaning, but in the embodied sensing of familiar space.

Inhabitants thus become unreflexively attuned to the sensations of place, habituated to scenes, textures, smells, sounds, and a host of affordances that are experienced repetitively and regularly. These sensory experiences, rarely subject to conscious thought, are enmeshed in the homes, neighbourhoods, travels, routes and events that are embedded in the quotidian spaces and banal 'place ballets' (Seamon, 1979) which undergird ways of doing, feeling and sensing. As Lucy Lippard comments, 'If one has been raised in a place, its textures and sensations, its smells and sounds, are recalled as they felt to child's, adolescent's, adult's body' (1997: 34). Interaction with space is thus never solely subject to symbolic signification but also to an embodied knowledge partly constituted by a sensual understanding deepened by time and embedded in memory (Noble, 2004). This sensory situatedness is thus shaped by familiarity with the smells, sights, textures, temperatures and sounds of place, characteristics that may usually be unnoticed but might come to mind when we are in unfamiliar settings in which their absence is replaced by other strange sensations.

It is in this context that Lefebvre's insistence on the centrality of bodily rhythms can inform an exploration of the sensory rhythms of place. He insists that 'to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been grasped by it' (2004: 27), and here he foregrounds the 'respirations, pulses, circulations, assimilations' (2004: 5) of the body, further arguing that the regulated 'rational' rhythms of industrial and bureaucratic life are constantly in contact with 'what is least rational in human being: the lived, the carnal, the body' (ibid: 9). It is through our senses and the effects of stimuli on the body that we can identify the sensory rhythms of place. This is not merely an auditory relationship, for 'the porosity of our bodies means we also *feel* sound waves' (Duffy et al., 2011: 18). And importantly, neither is it solely a cognitive matter, for as Duffy et al. claim, 'the body's capacity to sense rhythm opens up the in-betweenness of sensing and making sense' (ibid: 19). Brandon Labelle labels this alignment with the rhythms of place a form of 'auditory scaffolding' through which bodies become accommodated to place (Labelle, 2008).

Accordingly, this chapter explores how sonic beats are central constituents in soundscape of place, how, as Lefebvre (2004: 87) contends, a rhythm analyst is 'capable of listening to a house, street, a town as one listens to a symphony, an opera'. In so doing, besides being aware of our own bodily rhythms, we might become attuned to the rhythms made by humans and non-human agencies. First then, we can pay attention to how, according to Tom Mels (2004: 3), humans are 'rhythm-makers as much as place-makers', and part of this aptitude involves the production and performance of multiple auditory rhythms. Consider that throughout history and geography how the incantations of shamans, the ubiquity of drums, the chants of monks, and the auditory effects of dancing bodies have been part of nearly every society's cultural modes of expression (Hendy, 2014). The advent of the enlightenment and ever-more advancing technology has generated soundscapes increasingly typified by the mechanical rhythms of industrial production, motorized transport, and electronic media. Such sonic rhythms invariably intersect with the collective and individual rhythms of routines and scheduling. Second, rhythms are also incessantly produced by non-human forces, ranging from the patterns of weather that, for instance, herald the heavy beat of monsoon rains and the bursts of tropical thunder, to the

noises made by creatures, such as the recurrent cries of birds, the pulsing beat of crickets, and the croaking repetitions of frogs.

I will thus focus upon how these auditory rhythmic elements characterize daily and annual place-temporalities, and how they signify the distinctive parts of cities. I will also examine how sonic rhythms change according to social and cultural processes, certain sounds appearing and others emerging, and perhaps becoming more varied and contested as work schedules, leisure pursuits and cultural events become more flexible, transcending the more regular sonic rhythms of yesteryear.

The rhythmic marking of the time and space of place

Shifting sonic rhythms mark place-temporality (Wunderlich, 2010) in numerous ways, grounding a sense of the predictable practices and cyclical events that unfold over time to (re)produce place. In considering the effects that register the phases of the passing day we might identify the throb of morning rush hour traffic, the hubbub of schoolchildren making their way to school, the mid-morning quiescence that settles for a while, streets suddenly animated by the sounds and movements of those seeking lunch, the evening clatter of cutlery in the suburbs on a summer evening, the excitable nocturnal clamour of theatre, and club-goers in city centres and the boozy exclamations at pub closing times.

Most obviously, daily temporal passage is inscribed by the bells that mark out the metro-nomic passing of quarter-hours, half-hours, and hours. The renowned chimes of Big Ben in the clock tower of the Palace of Westminster extend across London as well as the nation in recorded sound that heralds radio and television news bulletins. In Edinburgh, the custom of firing a cannon on the battlements of the city's castle to proclaim the arrival of 1pm, formerly installed to relate the time to ships in the Firth of Forth, continues to echo across the city each day. These sonic rhythms of the everyday are also evocatively conjured in musical endeavours to capture the mood of place at distinctive times. The Indian classical music tradition of performing morning, twilight, and midnight ragas resonates with the tone of the time by expressing distinctive rhythms and melodies. In a different musical register, the late night / early morning sounds of the post-clubbing atmospheres of South London are evoked on Burial's 2007 cd, the melancholic *Untrue*, with snatches of music, conversation, vehicles and other sounds that occur well after dark, supplementing low key beats.

The rhythmic sounds of place also extend beyond the diurnal to mark distinctive occasions within the annual cycle of events. In the UK, consider the summer bank holiday, where noisy crowds move into streets, cars clog up the roads of esteemed rural settings, and children's voices resound through the back gardens of residential districts. Less festive commemorations, including those performed during important national(ist) ceremonies, might include the sober incantations of religious or political figures, the reverberating drumbeats, bugles and drums of marching soldiers, and the precise sounds of horses' hooves.

More celebratory auditory rhythms are generated at the proliferating numbers of festivals that are colonizing the summer months of many European locations, part of the intensified 'eventification' through which local commercial and political interests seek to attract ever-larger numbers of tourists, shoppers, investors and new inhabitants (Jakob, 2012). Large and small music festivals and art-oriented events offer a series of rhythms through which participants' bodies may align. This highlights how bodily capacities to sense rhythm are conjoined as audiences or those participating in a festive procession or ritual, clap, walk, and sing in unison, forming a temporary collective body that together reinforce the pulses and cadences of the event (Duffy et al., 2011). Music may significantly intensify such collective participation in and experience of

rhythm. For instance, in discussing the resonances afforded by popular music at festivals, Jackson discusses how '(T)he deeply sensual quality of the bass, its material succulence, penetrates the flesh like an alternative heartbeat that initiates a new physicality' (Jackson, 2004: 29). He further highlights how 'intoxication, the crowds and the music all work together to create new physical and emotional rhythms that underpin an alternative experience of self-in-world' (ibid: 30). The powerful rhythms produced at such events may disorient and repel those unused to them, perhaps those who prefer more sedate forms of entertainment and social engagement. However, enthusiastic participants are key co-producers of these rhythms, prepared to contribute and ready through prior anticipation to engage in the pulsing rituals that combine to produce potent atmospheres (Edensor, 2012). For example, both the highly organized rhythms of running, race management, broadcasting and policing, and the more festive rhythms of drummers and bystanders coalesce during sporting mega-events such as the Berlin Marathon (Edensor and Larsen, 2017). More broadly, like football fans who chant and clap rhythmically in order to encourage their team's performance on the field, rhythmic co-production facilitates a sense of absorption in the occasion. However, as Duffy et al. (2011) point out, a failure to co-ordinate and synchronize the order of events can generate a sense of arrhythmia and the consequent dissatisfaction and detachment of festival-goers.

Indeed, particular sounds can puncture the usual unfolding of predictable rhythms. The insistent, blaring pulse of emergency vehicles, felt in the body and exciting attention, produce speculation about what it is that has caused the urgency conveyed by the sound. Less dramatically, during summer afternoons, the melodic chimes of ice-cream vans grab the attention of children, and during the build-up to elections, vehicles crisscross urban space to broadcast their slogans.

An utterly transformed soundscape can be produced by responses to unexpected and sudden events that break the usual rhythms of place, such as a storm or heavy snowfall. The thick snow that fell in Manchester at midday after many years of absence was greeted by a sudden outpouring of people to walk and play, the air resounding with shouts and muffled footsteps. The customary roar of cars was silenced as they were suddenly coerced into a crawl by the treacherous conditions. In a different context, when Manchester City won the Premier League title league in May 2012, the noise that typically drifts away following the match as fans leave the stadium was spread to many areas of the city, as jubilant fans celebrated long into the night, drinking in large congregations outside bars and pubs.

This latter example highlights how the rhythms of sound are distributed across designated areas, with the stadium a temporary venue for rhythmic chanting and clapping on match days (Edensor, 2015). Places are composed of clusters of rhythmic hubbub and quiescence. It is expected that the din of noisy revellers may echo into the night in central entertainment districts but not in residential areas. The vivid sense of moving away from major thoroughfares to become surrounded by the quieter rhythms of the city's side streets and back alleys is a commonplace urban experience. Likewise, besides offering visual and tactile relief from urban clamour, parks are intended to foster a less harsh soundscape, with birdsong and the swaying of trees masking the urban racket beyond. The rhythms of lawnmowers, the clink of crown green bowls and the quack of ducks is accompanied by the laughter of children, and the creaking of roundabouts and swings in playgrounds. The quieter auditory rhythms of British suburbia perhaps commence with the clink and rattle of early morning milk and postal deliveries, followed by the hum of cars as commuting drivers leave their homes for work and children are driven to school. The day then settles into a quieter configuration of low noise until the accumulating sounds that herald the return from school and work, before a settling into hushed evenings.

Certain areas of the city seem to compress the articulation of different rhythms, most notably train and bus stations. For instance, at Piccadilly station in Manchester, the sounds of trains

sliding into and away from platforms, intermittent loudspeaker announcements and the surging footsteps of disembarking and embarking passengers are supplemented by the slower murmurs produced by those waiting for tickets, the gleeful cries of reacquaintance and the ceaseless, even mechanical swish of the escalators. In a different vein, signature jingles aid orientation on many of Tokyo's subway stations, contributing sonic identities to places and adding to the rhythmic structure of journeys.

Besides the diverse rhythms of particular urban spaces in any city, different cities are sites for extremely diverse and contrasting sonic rhythms. At variance to the rather regulated rhythms of many western cities is the soundscape of the Indian bazaar (Edensor, 2000). Here, sounds that would likely be minimised or banished in European and North American urban settings are free to combine, startling those unused to such sonic irruptions and rhythms, perhaps producing something akin to what Simmel describes as neurasthenia in his account of the sensory overload experienced by inhabitants of the early modern city. Since many animals are allowed to roam free, the utterances of cows, monkeys, and goats carry across space, along with human chatter and the cries of street-traders, religious orators, and political speakers. Diverse forms of traffic – bicycles, rickshaws and motorbikes, bullock carts, buses, lorries, and cars – collectively compose a shifting mechanized pulse. In addition, chiming temple temples and the *adhans* emitted from mosques must compete with loud Bollywood tunes that often dominate sonic experience.

The changing sonic rhythms of place

In addition to revealing the distinctive temporal phases and spaces of place, sonic rhythms also evoke the historical transformations of place. For instance, Alain Corbin (1998) shows how in 19th-century France, the recurrent chiming of the church bells constituted the most regular sonic human intervention in daily life, signifying regular periods of worship and festivity, as well as momentous occasions, warnings, and calls to congregate. Church bells continue to mark Sunday service in Christian settings but do not stand out from the soundscape of place as distinctively as they once did, having to compete with a host of contemporary rhythmic sounds that would have been absent. Similarly, the qualities of the muezzin's frequent calls to prayer in Islamic places, drifting across space five times daily, has changed in many cases with the use of amplified electronic recordings.

For those cities that emerged through industrial production, the sounds of manufacture (together with smells, sights and air quality) generated by cotton, iron, coal, shipbuilding, chemical and engineering production forged distinctive rhythms that marked the daily timetable of place. The relentless pulsating of cotton looms, rotation of pit winding gear, and clang of riveters, as well as numerous mechanical sounds and the shouts of workers escaped from these sites of production to resonate more widely. In many industrial locations, factory sirens would announce the commencement or cessation of shifts, as captured in Arseny Avraamov's remarkable *Symphony Of Factory Sirens*, staged in Baku in 1922. Similarly, in coastal settings the rhythms produced by the pulsing beams of light emanating from lighthouses were complemented by the regular boom of the foghorn, warning ships of maritime perils in foggy conditions. In an era of GPS and satellite technology, lighthouses have largely been decommissioned and consigned to heritage status, curtailing the luminous and sonic pulsations that formerly constituted powerful components of the rhythms of place. To commemorate the demise of the working life of Souter Lighthouse in South Shields, a Foghorn requiem, devised by Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway and composed by Orlando Gough, featured the lighthouse's foghorn and those of 50 ships that gathered in the adjacent North Sea, together with a local brass band (Autogena and Portway, 2018).

Industrial sonic rhythms are now largely absent not only due to the absence of production but also because of the intensification of the regulation of sound. Noise abatement policies have minimised many of the most disruptive auditory rhythms though conflicts over the continuous noise of traffic and aircraft persist. These tendencies to quieten the city have culminated in the redistribution of sonic rhythms so that quieter, though no less insistent sounds predominate. Some attribute this slow transformation to the dominance of commercial and bureaucratic forces that colonise everyday time and space, with Kanngieser contending that 'changing soundscapes of eviction and construction evidence changing distributions of power and governance' (Kanngieser, 2015: 81).

In exemplifying this, Jean Paul Thibaud (2014: 2–4) suggests that increasingly, 'explicit strategies to sensitize inhabited space' transform the media through which we experience the world, the sounds, odours, lights, colours, temperature and air quality that shape the conditions under which we apprehend place. As he asserts, 'urban design no longer just focuses on objects but also what is between the objects'. Thus designers attempt to produce affective tonalities, exemplified in such qualities as a 'soothing sonority', 'lively square' or 'heavy odour'. This appears to resonate with Trevor Boddy's (1992: 123–124) earlier depiction of what he terms the 'analogous city' in which a 'new urban prosthetics' incorporates 'incessant whirring', 'mechanical breezes', 'vaguely reassuring icons', 'trickling fountains' and 'low murmurings' that filter out 'troubling smells and winds'. Besides the rhythms instantiated by the muzak played in lifts, enclavic holiday resorts and shopping malls, and the saturation of festive songs to underscore the advent of the Christmas season in commercial spaces, the car has also increasingly become a sensorially controlled environment with the accelerated advancement of 'auditory cocooning' (Bijsterveld, 2010).

In contemporary cities and elsewhere, a familiar, rhythmic soundtrack to life is the constant background hum of vehicular traffic, frequently complemented by airplane and train noise, but intensified at particular periods of the day. Nevertheless, so prevalent are these sounds of mobile rhythms that they are rarely noticed. Yet this mechanical throb is of recent origin, and has certainly become more prevalent with the growing number of vehicles on roads. At the edges of my street in Manchester lies a remnant of the road that existed a hundred or so years ago, surfaced with cobbles. Ideally suited to gain purchase for the numerous horse and carts that plied their trade along Victorian and early 20th-century thoroughfares, cobbled surfaces would have afforded a wholly different, distinctive mundane sonic rhythm constituted by cart-wheels clattering along and the clip clop of horses' hooves, a soundscape utterly eclipsed by the ubiquity of mechanised vehicles. Indeed, the increasing use of streets as single-purpose channels of movement organized to offer seamless passage for vehicles (Sennett, 1994) has reduced the rhythmic sonic diversity that once persisted. Along central urban streets of the 1920s and 1930s in British working-class streets, a medley of traders, entertainers and musicians, children playing – including the incantations of girls' skipping games (Labelle, 2008) – would have contributed to a richly rhythmic urban sound.

Staying within my neighbourhood, older folk insist that the dawn chorus of today is a pale echo of the melodious clamour of yesteryear. While a few blackbirds and robins produce isolated calls in the early morning, many of the other birds that would have accompanied them, so the elderly neighbours claim, are no longer present. Instead, the most frequent non-human auditory rhythms are provided by the harsh call of the magpie, the chatter of grey squirrels, and the meowing of the local cats that have proliferated in recent years, perhaps acting to reduce the avian diversity of the past.

Yet certain auditory rhythms, like smells, have the potency to bring to memory sharp impressions of yesteryear. For example, the short-lived 1970s craze for *clackers*, two hard plastic balls attached to a string that could be manoeuvred to swing up and down rapidly to collide,

produced a piercing, rhythmic clacking sound that resonated across British school playgrounds, before they were banned on the grounds of safety (the balls could cause fractures to wrists and hands), is now occasionally heard following the production of safer versions of the toy. More evidently, particular musical rhythms can also recall certain historical periods that capture an atmosphere of a particular event or period of time. The first time I went to Los Angeles in 1972, the ubiquitous *Joker*, by the Steve Miller Band, seemed to be playing everywhere, adding to the alterity and unfamiliar ambience I sensed during a first encounter with this most singular of American cities. Similarly, on my first visit to the Notting Hill Carnival, the calypso rhythms of Explainer's *Lorraine*, seemingly the theme song of that year's celebrations, repeatedly cajoled dancers and bystanders into movement. Such sonic rhythmic experiences are inextricably linked with memories of place and event.

Contestation and the mutability of sonic rhythms

The increasing prevalence of commercial and bureaucratic sonic rhythms underlines the capacity of some to impose and install rhythms of all sorts on place. Thus the regular auditory rhythms of place inevitably signify the power of certain people to normalize the sensory qualities of place, to distribute the auditorily sensible (Rancière, 2006) and instantiate forms of common sense and sensing. Yet though many of the commonplace sonic rhythms of place are installed by political, commercial, and institutional powers, things are always liable to break down, with blackouts, traffic gridlock, and strikes causing arrhythmic sounds. Moreover, dissonant actors may produce their own sounds that contest the ordinary, regulated urban soundscape, as, for instance, with the cacophonous, harsh beats of the 'pots and pans' protestors in recent urban demonstrations (Hendy, 2014).

A further effect of the power to install rhythms on space is through what Lefebvre terms 'dressage', the disciplining of the body through repetitive rhythms so as to produce a certain automatism. The rhythmic march of disciplinary military drills, supplemented by brass bands, in ceremonial parades testify to this somatic regulation. However, other similarly embodied pursuits, equally solicited through repetitive entrainment, may articulate more pleasurable sounds. Shannon Hensley shows how through prolonged practice in dancing rumba, Cubans absorb rhythm into their bodies. Also consider the rhythmic slaps and shouts of cheerleaders, or the clapping and chanting of football fans as they make their way to the match. Other groups adopt auditory tactics to assert their own sonic identities on space, as, for instance, Labelle (2008) details in his account of the heavy, mega-bassbeats favoured by Mexican-American youths to imprint their presence on the streets of Los Angeles, saturating space with rhythmic intensities. We might also refer to the use of i-pods and other personal stereo devices through which listeners may move to their own beat as they travel across place, providing private rhythms that set the pace for daily actions and often bypass dominant auditory rhythms (Bull, 2000; 2005).

In a different context, Bandak explains that the city is often 'a place of dense cohabitation ... in which different attempts at making it a place of continuous belonging are constantly at play', exemplifying his argument with a discussion of how Christians claim space in predominantly Muslim Damascus through sonic repetitions and reiterations in religious ceremonies and parades (2014: s259).

In this chapter, I have endeavoured to show how a combination of sonic rhythms gives a distinctive texture to place, contributing to the affective intensities and sensory orientations of belonging. This recognition also highlights how our bodies cannot be conceived as detached from place but are folded into spatial being and knowledge (Duffy et al., 2011) into a relationship with place. Extended inhabitation and enduring familiarity means that they may often be

overlooked and only noticed when they change or lamented when they disappear. Yet though these auditory rhythms may collectively solicit a stable, reliable sense of belonging for a spell, they are liable to dissipate or abruptly terminate, like our own bodies and so many other elements within a vital, volatile world. For in focusing upon a range of location, I have undercut any suggestion that there are normative rhythmic soundscapes and emphasised that they are shaped by particular historical, social, and cultural contexts, which they, in turn, articulate.

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