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### Structures of sonic feeling

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# 31

## STRUCTURES OF SONIC FEELING

*Tom Artiss*

I begin again to ask myself what it could have been, this unremembered state which brought with it no logical proof of its existence, but only the sense that it was a happy, that it was a real state in whose presence other states of consciousness melted and vanished. I decide to attempt to make it reappear ... I find again the same state, illumined by no fresh light ... I do not know yet what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly; I can measure the resistance, I can hear the echo of great spaces traversed.

*(Marcel Proust 2005)*

For three hours each weekday afternoon in the northern Canadian Inuit community of Nain, Labrador, the daily broadcast of the local radio station (OKâlaKatiget) can be heard in almost every enclosed space with a functioning electrical socket. Programming includes local news, public service announcements, personal messages, bingo, and music, all contributing as much to local auditory life as yelping husky dogs and shifting sea ice. Drawing from ethnographic research conducted in Nain, this chapter introduces and discusses technologically mediated *structures of sonic feeling*: imprints of hearing experiences that articulate subjective constellations of sound, time, and space.

In the soundscapes created by radio in Nain, structures of sonic feeling are formed in different ways, on multiple levels, and with varied intensities over time. Particular radio announcers, musical selections, news themes, programming formats, broadcasting technology, and community members in the mid-1980s, for example, combined in ways that make the overall sound experience recognizably distinct from the one resulting from a similar combination today. From this, I am concerned, first, with the affective force of mediated sound, and second, with the human interventions into its fields of reception, converted and repurposed by hearing actors from products of sound-making technology into means for the production and circulation of affective subjectivities.

### **One's noise, another's music**

Technologically mediated sounds may predate Alexander Graham Bell, but their theoretical provenance can be located in R. Murray Schafer's acoustic ecology (1994 [1977]). Soundscapes – Schafer's auditory equivalent to landscapes – were, in part, a prescriptive solution to noise

pollution. The problem, as he saw it, was not a technologically enhanced cacophony but, rather, our responses to it: noises “are the sounds we have learned to ignore” (Schafer 1994: 4). If the tendency is to block out undesirable sounds, Schafer believed we should be attuned to the whole *mix*, to discriminate between “destructive sounds” and those that ought to be “preserved” (ibid.). Developing a discriminating ear – “clairaudience” or “clear hearing” (ibid.: 10, 11) – is key to a heightened appreciation of all sound experience, both as aesthetic raw materials and as musical compositions (ibid.: 5): “Today all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying *within the comprehensive dominion of music*. Behold the new orchestra: the sonic universe! ... And the musicians: anyone and anything that sounds!” (ibid.: 5, his emphasis).

Structures of sonic feeling, as a category of analysis, emerges from Schafer’s “soundscapes” (co-extensive here with music), but there are at least two ruptures in its genealogy. The first has to do with his interest in soundscapes as a socio-historical analytic. Following Marshall McLuhan (1962) – himself indebted to Harold Innis (1951) – Schafer identifies structural relationships between societies and their sonic production, writing that

music is an indicator of the age, revealing, for those who know how to read its symptomatic messages, a means of fixing social and even political events ... the general acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce it and may tell us much about the trending and evolution of that society.

(ibid.: 7)

The idea that music reflects society was a significant extension of contemporary scholarship occupied primarily with music itself, presuming a cultural product independent of social, political, and historical forces. But the homology model – music as index – has since been extended by authors identifying ways in which music not only reflects but also inflects its social and historical contexts (Frith 1996; Stokes 1994; Feld 1996; Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000). While acknowledging a debt to Schafer’s contributions, Steven Feld identifies a structuralist slant that sonically analogizes landscape, distances agency from perception, replaces occularcentrism with sonocentrism, and isolates sound from human and non-human relations (Feld 2015: 15). His alternative, “acoustemology,” is a theorization of sounding and listening that “centralizes situated listening in engagements with place and space-time ... and prioritizes histories of listening and sounding and their reflexive productions of feedback” (ibid.). I will return to subjective, agential interventions in sonic space and place below. For now, three more terms from Schafer’s acoustic ecology are relevant: “keynote sounds,” “signals,” and “soundmarks” (1994: 9).

Keynotes are “the sounds over which a culture is created” (Schafer: 2005). They are ubiquitous, quotidian sounds such as the scratching of a quill pen on paper in early modern times, or the electrical hums of lighting systems and air conditioning today (ibid.) – the sonic backdrops of a society in history. Signals, by contrast, are deliberately prominent and include sounds made by mobile phones and train whistles. Soundmarks, which receive the bulk of Schafer’s attention, are “sounds that obtrude over the acoustic horizon ... prominent sounds possessing properties of uniqueness, symbolic power, or other qualities that make them especially conspicuous or respectfully regarded” (ibid.). Highlighting a parallel between soundmarks and landmarks, Schafer proposes thinking about a foghorn in Vancouver in much the same way as we regard a cathedral, castle, or bank tower (ibid.). Unlike keynotes (mundane) and signals (grating), “once a soundmark has been identified, it deserves to be protected, for soundmarks make the community unique” (1994: 10). To extend Schafer’s architecture metaphor, if “a bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture” – as *Buildings of England* author Nikolas

Pevsner once opined (in Sutton 1999: 7) – then ringtones are noise and foghorns are musical instruments. Just as a cathedral rises above its surrounding urban grime and chaos, soundmarks represent sonic cultural value against a backdrop of noise pollution. But what about the mundane sounds of everyday life that *are* registered, significant, and meaningful? Do not subjective responses to sounds vary? Can one person's noise be another's music?

To share an example from my own experience, each Friday, usually around 6:30 a.m., the recycling is collected on my street of Victorian terrace houses in North London. For a lot of people in the area, sounds made by the contents of green plastic recycling boxes as they are emptied into larger plastic wheeled bins – which in turn are emptied into collection trucks – is a familiar one. For me, it starts faintly in the distance at the end of the street and gradually gets louder with each repetition, until the council worker reaches my box, on the sidewalk just below my bedroom window. As the rhythm continues, the volume fades. It takes a team of three workers approximately twenty minutes to collect all the recycling on my street and if I am asleep, the sound usually wakes me up. Having lived here for several years, numerous responses are triggered. If I haven't put the box out the night before, it is panic. In general, though, the sound has become intertwined with a subjective history of people, place, and time; interconnected individual experiences related to, for example, love, death, professional successes/failures, and even important global events – for the latter, a sound that punctuated *this* place when *that* happened.

Notably, the singular designs and materials of both the bins and their contents produce sounds unique to them and their combinations. If the bins were tin, as they might have been twenty or thirty years ago and perhaps still are in other urban centres, the sounds produced would differ in significant ways. The particular layout of terrace houses also contributes to a distinct resonance. My street is unusually wide, like a boulevard, and is broken up at the halfway point by a garden square. While similar sounds may be repeated in other streets and boroughs, variations in materials, design and context can result in subtle differences that may not be perceptible at a cognitive level but might be registered at an affective one. This means that the sounds of recycling collection at another time and place are less likely to produce an equivalent affective response, although occasionally they will. The result – a unique, technology-afforded sonic composition – is an important feature of my cultural-sensorial tapestry. Even if they have no composer, the mundane, contingent character of sounds such as these does not make them less culture-bound.

As Raymond Williams noted in the 1960s and 1970s, while the formal and inscribed aspects of bourgeois cultural production are easy to mistake for culture itself, if culture is limited to symphonies, plays, poetry, novels, etc., a lot of people – especially, for him, the working classes – would be left with no culture at all. Williams saw this as an analytical shortcoming, not an existential one. If established gauges were ruling out culture in large swathes of the population, then the gauges were inadequate, not the groups being considered. Culture, he answered, “is not only a body of intellectual and imaginative work, it is also and essentially a whole way of life” (Williams 1960: 344). Turning the lens away from cultural artifacts of the bourgeoisie, he focused instead on a neglected substrate of “living practices.” These “structures of feeling” – also described by him as “characteristic elements of tone” and “social experience in solution” – are elusive because the phenomena they refer to are “at the cusp of semantic availability” (Williams 1977: 132–33). Perhaps it is for this reason that subsequent interpretations and applications vary greatly; the concept's vagueness may even contribute to its appeal. Named but not defined, structures of feeling can do a lot of different work.

As for the recycling on my street, what was initially an undesirable sound that woke me up early most Friday mornings eventually became a distinct, intangible artifact in my living sensory archive. It does not need a place on a value-spectrum to become culturally significant.

Schafer's soundmarks, like landmarks, are those salient, inscribed referents of sonic space that, by their prominence and prestige, overshadow and diminish keynotes and signals. But the everyday noises, ones that do not qualify as soundmarks, can also inform our understanding of sonically mediated social space-time. Structures of sonic feeling are not constituted via "important" sounds alone. Their emergence and continuity rely equally on everyday, mundane sounds, even those that might be thought of as sources of noise pollution. They are the sonic extension of Williams' expanded version of culture. But that is not all.

### DitY (doing it to yourself) with music

As a shorthand for "tonal" elements of quotidian social experience, structures of feeling became a foundational concept for theorists concerned with ways in which affects are entangled with sense objects and how these intersections inform social understanding, relationality, and agency. Kathleen Stewart's ordinary affects, for example, form clusters around objects, scenes, and technologies. Sensory triggers such as sound, smell, and taste form host structures for the articulation and expression of common emotions and feelings (2007: 1–6). The ways in which affects cling to sense objects is the first of two related themes addressed in the remainder of this chapter.

Daily throughout the year, OKâlaKatiget receives dozens of requests for songs to be played on air. When a request is phoned in – the most common method – a receptionist writes down the details on recycled paper, ruler-torn especially for the purpose into approximately 3 × 5-inch slips. Each request includes the title of the song, the name of the requester, and the name of the person or persons to whom it is dedicated. Requests frequently include the reason why something is being requested (e.g., birthday, wedding anniversary, condolences for a deceased loved one, congratulations for an achievement, etc.), and, occasionally, a personalized message (e.g., "lots of love from Mom," "love you and miss you"). Depending on the time of year, the number of requests can range from a dozen to over fifty per day.

Sharing and connecting are the most evident and frequent reasons to request a song. Expressions of friendship and love – both familial and romantic – are common. Much more rare are songs requested to unload or inflict negative sentiments such as anger, jealousy, or resentment. On one occasion *Who Let The Dogs Out* by Baha Men was dedicated to the current lover of the requester's ex-husband. After a hastily called meeting, three radio producers decided not to play it because they thought the intent was spiteful. While examples like this are rare, they indicate the extent to which requested songs are laden with affective potency. More common were songs requested to call up painful past experiences.

For Gordon Obed, a radio producer and DJ at the station, Kris Kristofferson's *Road Warrior's Lament* reminds him of his young grandson, who died in a tragic boating accident. The song was played at his grandson's funeral and has since become an "anthem of lost loved ones" (Obed, 2010). He says that even though hearing it makes him sad, he does not mind playing it on air when requested by others. Sometimes he plays it unprompted. Other times, when he is not working, he calls in to request it himself (ibid.). He does not want to keep reliving the tragedy, and yet he continues to be drawn to a song that reminds him of it.

On one level, the relationship between requester and song is a private one, indexing feelings and emotions within the individual subject. Tia DeNora has theorized similar private engagements with music in terms of the creation, care, and maintenance of emotional identities (DeNora 1999: 32). As a "technology of the self," she writes, music serves as "a resource to which people turn in order to regulate themselves as aesthetic agents, as feeling, thinking, and acting beings in their day-to-day lives" (ibid.: 45). In DeNora's terms, Obed requests *Road Warrior's Lament* "for the ongoing work of self-construction, and the emotional, memory, and

biographical work that that project entails” (ibid.: 32). “Musical materials,” she writes, “provide the terms and templates for elaborating self-identity;” for listeners to “literally ‘find’ themselves in musical structures” (ibid.: 49). Here DeNora is adding a musical perspective to a constructivist line of inquiry in cultural sociology about the subject in late modernity. Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical social interaction (1956) and the theorizations of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens advancing reflexive modernity (Beck 1992; Giddens 1990, 1991) are notable precursors. Lash and Urry follow with “aesthetic reflexivity” denoting non-cognitive processes of self-maintenance associated with artistic consumption (Lash and Urry 1994). I propose extending this line a step further to consider processes of emotional self-regulation as *affective* reflexivity.

Marcel Proust famously describes this process in *Swann’s Way*, the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*. The passage in question relates how a morsel of madeleine cake dipped in tea unlocked intense feelings from his childhood in Combray (2005: 51–54). Chance encounters such as these – that take us deep into our emotional repositories and activate long-forgotten or dormant sense-memories – are not uncommon; most have experienced something similar. However, while the accidental, taste-triggered reunion with a sensing and feeling past is the theme for which his lines are most remembered, what follows – his subsequent efforts to recapture “this all-powerful joy” (ibid.: 51) – is equally important. Like a scientist in a lab, he tries to recreate the conditions that preceded the effect, first with tea and cake, and then by returning with his mind to the critical moment. In the end, he manages both to reactivate the sense-experience and to identify the precise, buried memory associated with it.

For Proust, the madeleine became an instrument of affective reflexivity, the means for a purposeful engagement with the sense-emotion environment and, by extension, for the mediation of emotional subjectivity. In terms of analysis, from here we can identify different levels of technological mediation where mediating properties shift from the technologies themselves to their products. Sound recording technologies, for example, have made it increasingly possible, easy even, to refashion, rework, reconfigure other people’s creative outputs. Cut and paste approaches to music production like the mash-up, collage, and remix are now ubiquitous modes of contemporary expression. In the context of DIY music cultures, and their relationships to space and place, found musical objects are repurposed to make new music objects.

For Thomas Porcello, the recording studio is a site of both creation and documentation, where engineering technologies are used to invent new sounds and replicate natural ones (2005: 273). Working from Feld, he proposes “techoustemology” as a way to describe technological mediation that implicates contemporary thought-, feeling-, and action-responses to acoustic environments (ibid.: 270). One of his aims is to shift the focus from “the examination of the products of sound engineering” to “the processes of engineering as a vital aspect of contemporary cultural life” (ibid.: 269). While structures of sonic feeling are tied to these processes – or “everyday *uses* of technology by social actors” (ibid.) – they differ in one key respect. Whereas Porcello is primarily concerned with the ways in which actors “craft sonic artifacts and environments,” structures of sonic feeling looks beyond the processes of creating artifacts and environments to the ways the outcomes of these processes are themselves received, engaged, and utilized – strategically or otherwise – to craft feelingful subjectivities. Returning to Schafer and Feld, then, to techoustemology, we can add the emotional and psychological tactility of sound. “Hearing,” as Schafer writes, “is a way of touching at a distance” (1994: 11). By looking at ways in which the soundscapes of media are engaged as technologies of the self, the recording studio of Porcello can be a metaphor for the soundscapes they help create, as sites and means of a different kind of subjective production.

With structures of feeling, Williams presages recent contributions by theorists of affect seeking to understand and interpret a range of extra-cognitive phenomena heretofore largely

understudied (Stewart 2007; Blackman 2012, 2008; Gregg and Seigworth et al.; 2010; Berlant 2011, 1998; Massumi 2002, 1995; Brennan 2004; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Teresa Brennan locates a substrate of emotions independent of the individual experiencing them (2004: 13) and suggests “affects find thoughts that suit them, not the other way around” (ibid.: 7). Similarly, Brian Massumi, interpreting Deleuze, defines affect as a “pre-personal intensity” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: xvi). In such terms, underneath – or before – the unique personal experiences articulated via the sounds of recycling collection, for example, exist basic, raw, autonomic, even biological affective capacities and potencies common to all. In theory, such a prepersonal plane, independent of individual experience – desires, intentions, agency – is not subject to individual interventions and engagements, strategic or otherwise. I am suggesting, by contrast, that structures of sonic feeling arise from co-presences of and movements between these two ideal states, personal and prepersonal.

This is not a new idea. As early as 1993, Mark Slobin was writing that “music seems to have an odd quality that even passionate activities like gardening or dog-raising lack: the simultaneous projecting and dissolving of the self” (Slobin 1993: 141). And Simon Frith in 1996 writes that “we both express ourselves and suborn ourselves – or lose ourselves – in acts of musical participation” (Frith 1996: 110). Ethnographic examples of musically mediated social interactions also reveal co-presences of or movements between these states. Returning to the Obed example, requesting or playing *Road Warrior's Lament* is an assertion of selfhood, in the form of proprietary feelings (*his* grief), and a mainline into a collective plane of “singularity” (Deleuze 2001: 25–34). In a community where few have escaped the tragic loss of a loved one, grief is something almost everyone shares.

## Conclusion

This chapter merges and extends several distinct but interconnected theoretical trajectories that overlap in selected ways to offer a category of analysis mirrored in practice, which I am calling structures of sonic feeling. R. Murray Schafer's acoustic ecology establishes capacities for subjective constellations to take shape around audition. But like the bourgeois culture of Raymond Williams's critiques – which might admit cathedrals but reject bicycle sheds – it also presumes a hierarchy. Williams's answer, structures of feeling, recognizes a substrate of experience-based cultural sensibilities distinct from the forms they may take. For him, cathedrals, operas, and foghorns are expressions of culture, not culture itself. Similarly, quotidian sonic experiences such as recycling collection on my street can become extra-linguistic cultural artifacts in our living sensory archives. But again, as with Proust – where the relationship between Combray and a madeleine, between source and trigger, is half the story – structures of sonic feeling are not fully realized until their affective field is reflexively engaged. Whereas Porcello emphasizes ways in which subjectivity is brought to bear on music production via technology, towards a reconfigured musical end, DeNora shows the reverse is also possible: technologically mediated sound used as a means for the reconfiguration of the feeling self. In short, I am proposing that DeNora's technologies of the self can be stretched ever so slightly to cover the affective tactility of mediated sound and how it is engaged to both assert and dissolve the feeling subject.

While technologies that did not exist in Proust's time are clearly not a necessary condition for affective reflexivity, they certainly can enhance it, as David Bowie presciently observes:

The context and the state of content is going to be so different to anything we can envisage at the moment, where the interplay between the user and the provider is going to be so sympatico, it's going to crush our ideas of what mediums are all about.

It's happening in visual art. The breakthroughs at the early part of the century; people like Duchamp were so prescient with what they were doing and putting down. The idea that the piece of work is not finished until the audience come to it and add their own interpretation and what the piece of art is about is the grey space in the middle. That grey space in the middle is what the 21st century is going to be about.

(David Bowie 1999)

Via the radio station in Nain, *Road Warrior's Lament* and other frequently requested songs fill out and enliven Bowie's "grey space in the middle," creating structures of sonic feeling, activated and reactivated by subsequent song requests. And if we zoom out from the particular relationship between a requested song and its attendant structures of sonic feeling, and consider, for example, the sonic space resulting from a single day's three-hour broadcast, involving a dozen or more requested songs, a constellation of structures of sonic feeling is generated from a patchwork of songs – a collage, a mash-up, a remix of feeling selves. If DIY means doing music yourself, then DIY is doing structures of sonic feeling to your self with music.

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