Scenari del contemporaneo: esperienze estetiche, pratiche artistiche e forme di vita
Università degli Studi di Firenze, 25-26 Maggio 2017

Contemporary acoustic flâneries: sound art and the aesthetic experience of the city

Flâneries acustiche contemporanee: l’arte sonora e l’esperienza estetica della città

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Summary:
- What do we mean when talking of an “aesthetic experience of the city”?

- Strolling in the city: Flâneries

- Walking through the city ‘with the ear more attentive than the eye’

- Sound art and contemporary acoustic flâneries

- Some examples
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What do we mean when talking of an “aesthetic experience of the city”? How is it possible to experience the city aesthetically? And what is this city? Is it an aesthetic object, an aesthetic context, an environment or simply a background where aesthetic experiences may occur?

Many of the same aesthetic properties and formal or evocative qualities that may be attributed to art objects can, in a similar or analogical fashion, be recognized in non-artistic objects or events. So, if we agree that aesthetic experiences may involve the perception and appreciation of such properties and qualities as well as the consideration of aesthetic values and the enjoyable – and eventually ‘disinterested’ - pleasure procured by such experiences, then it is fairly reasonable to conceive and accept that aesthetic experiences of objects, events or activities in non-artistic contexts may occur.
The city is not properly an object, even though we can think of it, ideally, as a whole; it cannot be easily grasped or apprehended by our senses as that whole, unless from a distance – as when we perceive it from an airplane – but then it is no longer a city that we can experience, just a vague, blurry and almost formless blotch on the surface of the earth, with indefinite boundaries.
Present-day cities are pervasive landscapes of massive but heterogeneous built environments, denser areas of complex urban structures interspersed with sparser opened spaces, “terrains vagues”, almost empty and sometimes resembling the countryside, yet scarred by recognizable items of human presence, road bridges, derelict buildings, discarded machinery, landfills and other indicators of previous or future urban activity.
To perceive all this complex diversity and to experience the city, in a strict sense, we must get through it.

**Etymologically**, *experience* comes from the latin *experiri*, to endure. But the stem is *periri*, which we may find in peril and danger, *pericolo*. According to Lacoue-Labarthe the indo-european root is *-per* related to the idea of “to cross”, “to go through” and secondarily to "trial" or "ordeal". The greek word *peirô* [*πείρω*] means to pierce, to pass through and *peraô* [*περάω*] to make an effort, endeavour.

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The city is not an object / but how do we experience it?

The city is not just a complex set of visible surfaces and neither a mere, even if tremendously diversified, compound of tactile volumes, it is a dynamic and multisensorial environment composed with states of affairs, relations between objects, structures, agents and the events they produce or that occur as a result of multiple interacting factors, it is a continuous variation of processes, movements and fluxes.

To sum it up grossly: the city is a dynamic environment, a living set of planned or accidental and sometimes incoherent urban structures, geographic and atmospheric conditions, social forces, activities and, to put it plainly, human life.

Experiencing the city is, in fact, a bundle of multiple, diversified and fragmented experiences, some more meaningful and more intense than others, charged with sensorial information, cognitive interactions with its features and happenings and the affective impressions and moods that result from those interactions combined with the awareness and sensibility of the subject of experience.
How then to distinguish between the trivial and the aesthetic experiences of the city?

I would say that, in order to experience the city aesthetically, one will have to be sensorially attentive, cognitively aware and emotionally engaged with the urban environment and the life within.
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Early flâneries:

The early eighteenth century “rambles” and “speculations” of Joseph Addison in *The Spectator*; John Gay's *Trivia, or the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716); Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* (1781-8); Restif de la Bretonne's *Les nuits de Paris ou le Spectateur nocturne* (1788-94)
These early examples of urban walking exploration were somehow announcing a very famous literary figure of the nineteenth century Paris: the **flâneur**.

*Les physiologues* were collecting urban types and social customs as if “botanizing the asphalt” (Benjamin); the "**painter of modern life**" (Baudelaire) was capturing the fleeting/ephemeral character of modern experience in the heart of the French metropolis, Paris.
Contemporary versions of the flâneur are not just plain imitations of the nineteenth century physiologists, since they also inherited an intermediate history of other urban pedestrian avant-garde artistic practices.

Dada’s urban excursions to banal places of the city – as the one they did in 1921 to the almost empty garden alongside Saint-Julien-Le-Pauvre’s church –; surrealist Parisian perambulations, in the 20’s and 30’s, often done within the threshold of restlessness and dreamy unconscious states, contaminating street strolling with automatic lyricism.
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Psychogeography is the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.

(Internationale Situationiste, nº1, 1958)
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“... with the ear more attentive than the eye”

Everything moves in the city and every movement makes a sound.

Thus, paying attention to how the city sounds, listening to the multitude of events, their nuanced timbres and assorted rhythms, the intensity and variability of pitches, the harmonies and dissonances and also the fewer but revealing silences, is a very good way of observing, understanding and feeling urban experience.

The fact that sound is a particular event, a localized disturbance of a surrounding medium that produces pressure waves (O'Callaghan, 2007), which can be propagated, reflected or refracted in a concrete space, and is revealed to auditory perception through a bundle of some specific and transient audible qualities (timbre, pitch, volume and duration) that change according to several conditions (distance, orientation, atmosphere, etc) but that transmit a lot of considerable information concerning sound sources and also about the time and place when and where the sounding events occurred, all this definitely makes it a very useful perception mode to learn but also to feel the environment, in this case, the urban environment.
Attraversiamo una grande capitale moderna, con le orecchie più attente degli occhi, e godremo nel distinguere i risucchi d’acqua, d’aria o di gas nei tubi metallici, il borbottio dei motori che fiatano e pulsano con una indiscutibile animalità, il palpitare delle valvole, l’andirivieni degli stantuffi, gli stridori delle seghe meccaniche, i balzi del tram sulle rotaie, lo schioccar delle fruste, il garrire delle tende e delle bandiere. Ci divertiremo ad orchestrare idealmente insieme il fragore delle saracinesche dei negozi, le porte sbatucchianti, il brusio e lo scarpiccìo delle folle, i diversi frastuoni delle stazioni, delle ferrerie, delle filande, delle tipografie, delle centrali elettriche e delle ferrovie sotterranee.

(Luigi Russolo, L’Arte dei Rumori, 1913)
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As a percussionist I had been directly involved in the gradual insertion of everyday sounds into the concert hall, from Russolo through Edgard Varese and finally to John Cage where live street sounds were brought directly into the hall. I saw these activities as a way of giving aesthetic credence to these sounds – something I was all for. I began to question the effectiveness of the method, though. Most members of the audience seemed more impressed with the scandal of 'ordinary' sounds placed in a 'sacred' place than with the sounds themselves, and few were able to carry the experience over to a new perspective on the sounds of their daily lives.

I became interested in going a step further. Why limit listening to the concert hall? Instead of bringing these sounds into the hall, why not simply take the audience outside?

(Max Neuhaus on LISTEN)
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A **soundwalk** is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are. We may be at home, we may be walking across a downtown street, through a park, along the beach (...) wherever we go we will give our ears priority.

It can be done alone or with a friend (...). It can also be done in small groups, in which case it is always interesting to explore the interplay between group listening and individual listening (...). A soundwalk can furthermore cover a wide area or it can just centre around one particular place. No matter what form a soundwalk takes, its focus is to rediscover and reactivate our sense of hearing.

Hildegard Westerkamp, *Soundwalking*, 1974
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In group soundwalks or oriented listening walks, the guide can suggest diverse aural *foci* when listening to the urban environment:

paying attention to the musical aspects of the city soundscape (pitches, rhythms, textures, harmonies) or otherwise listening while thinking about relationships between bodily sounds and their surroundings (which she calls subjective listening); or between the sounds they are hearing and have heard in the past, in case they were already familiar with that street or district of the city (historical); the listener can instead be made aware of other sensual associations that are evoked by the listening walk; and finally attention can be drawn to the political relationship between sounds, those which are predominant, those which are masked by others and barely heard and eventually question why and who controls these sounds.

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Akio Suzuki, *Oto-Date* (1996- ongoing)

[here, at a listening point at Torino in 2006]
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[here being guided by a blindman in Montréal]
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References (selection):


