

Overhearing, Shared Space, and the Ethics of Interference

Brandon LaBelle

*keynote lecture delivered at Invisible Places symposium, Viseu, Portugal, July 2014

My interest is to think through sound as a type of knowledge pathway – a practice of thinking – from which different understandings of social life, bodily identities, and spatial relations for instance may materialize. Or at least be imagined. As part of this project I'm keen to write as a listening subject, as a body caught within the dynamics of acoustic space, and that tries to write its way out, or deeper in: in other words, to take seriously what happens if we place sound at the center of our critical and creative thinking, not to mention as a way of being amongst others.

In doing so, I've come to recognize how sound is deeply connected to experiences of not only intimate sharing, social bonding, and reassurance, but also disruption, interruption, and threat: how easily these two acoustic territories brush against each other... which to my listening, comes to suggest that experiences of sound are precisely opportunities for vulnerability: of the body, of the senses, as well as of our social boundaries.

For today, I'd like to extend such thinking, such vulnerability, by focusing on noise and the other: noise as the production of the social, that is, a generative experience by which we may share space. Noise, in this regard, need not be thought of in terms of volume, nor as having any particular sonic quality. Rather, I emphasize noise as the beginning of confrontation, negotiation, and the appearance of the unwanted; noise, as Michel Serres suggests, as the "rending" of any system or order that actually promotes new social and bodily configurations.¹

I want to locate noise then as the initiation of a social encounter: bodies meeting and on the threshold of possible community. In this regard, noise may be heard or defined as a sound which *over-steps* particular limits, that which is *out of place*, and as forming the *basis* for an art of listening. Such a perspective finds resonance with Russolo's original "art of noises" in which he calls for a broader appreciation for those surges of urban sound. That is, an ear for the "continuous, very strange and marvelous hubbhub of the crowd."²

To develop this further I want to bring into consideration a particular memory, of attending a concert in Los Angeles in 1998 – an event that, while arising out of a personal situation, has come to suggest a greater set of ideas; an event that also continues to haunt my listening imagination: I go back to it again and again, extracting from it a continual flow of reflections as well as motivating force. I'm interested to dwell on this concert experience so as to situate noise as an event of listening deeply linked to place as well as social experience, that is, connected to those always already beside me and whose presence conditions, interferes with, and shapes my own. What I may call: You, They or Them, and which may become Us, though never fully.

¹ Michel Serres, *Genesis*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

² Luigi Russolo, *Art of Noises*. New York: Pendragon Press, 1986, 45.

To map this further, I also bring forward what I call three coordinates of *listening to noise*:

1. Acoustics multiplied
2. The supplement
3. Difference-making

I imagine these as coordinates within the field of sound by which to open a view onto noise: to explore the particular forms and spatial vocabularies noise may be heard to produce, extending an understanding of sound toward the intensities of urban life. If noise can be thought of as the production of the social, of an acoustic space, what forms of inhabitation does it make possible? And by extension, is it possible to understand interference or disruption as the beginning of a new public, one much more visceral than discursive? And dare I say: a unique production of togetherness?

-

Los Angeles, 1998: I'm at a club with a group of friends. We've gone out to see a band, and the place is packed. I'm standing a bit to the back, sandwiched between friends and strangers, drink in hand and the band in front, not too far, but not exactly close: it's a small club, and everyone is listening, focused, interested. All, except a few – to my right, about 6 or 7 meters away, a few guys are standing, drinking beers and talking, laughing, having a good time and rather oblivious to the situation – that is, that they are breaking the mood, disrupting the scene, causing a ruckus.

Suddenly you might say, I am caught between two perspectives, two performances, two forms of listening: in front of me, the band, the object of attention, the thing I am here to witness, and to the right, a group of talkers, conversing somewhere between quiet and loud, but still, loud enough to unsettle my main focus, my main perspective.

The situation continues for some time: other people start to yell at the group who are talking, the group even starts to yell back, and maybe, I'm not sure, even the band starts to get annoyed. In this moment though, something changes, for myself: I begin to realize that what is happening is extremely provocative, and extremely suggestive – in this moment, I begin to realize what it means to listen. That sound is never an isolated event, that there are always sounds to the side of another sound, and which we constantly over-hear. Listening, in other words, is a process of confronting the expressive movements occurring around us, and which act to broaden one's attention, especially by force.

While this experience of disruption was not necessarily new to me, nor does it stand out within the patterns of rock club behavior – still, at this instant, it brought forward a sudden recognition: I became aware that my own annoyance was precisely an opportunity. That if listening is to deepen one's experience of the world, then noise provides a dynamic manifestation of such depth, an active education of sound's more forceful *knowledge structure*. Of knowing, and of being known; not as composition or resonance, but as association and rupture – of being thrown into the presence of others. In

this sense, over-hearing points the way for a consideration of not so much what is in front, but rather next to; or what is beyond me – that is, a sensitivity for the crowd.

It is my interest to embrace this moment of disturbance, this noise, this over-here, and understand it as a special kind of acoustic, and something to add to how we perceive and comprehend sounds around us. I would venture to say, that the "over-here", these guys over-here, is the horizon of every sound. It's the promise that every sound makes: to say – "here, I am over-here".

I want to then use this notion of "over-hearing", of sounds that appear *over-here*, that moment of interruption or rupture, as a fundamental theory of the sound arts, as well as to suggest an appreciation for noise as a productive and generative event. Over-hearing should be understood as an expanded listening, one that specifically displaces place with an agitation: where what is in front is contrasted with what is beyond; over-hearing, as I will suggest, as a listening to *more than*, especially to what or who I do not know.

Moving along, I'll begin by drawing out my three coordinates of listening, which are equally three forms of spatial thinking, of *dis-placing*, *over-hearing* and *eaves-dropping*.

1. Acoustics multiplied

The first would be that *sound multiplies perspectives*. In other words, there is always a sound outside the frame of a particular listening, which often interferes with or occurs to the side, to become immediately part of the experience. I would emphasize that, in general terms, sound delivers *the outside*, to displace or unsettle the demarcations we put upon listening; it fundamentally and continuously redraws the lines separating in from out, as well as distance and proximity, by delivering a palpable overlap and intersection, an acoustics of multiplicity.

For example: the talking occurring at the club, the thing that is to the side of the band, can be heard, in its moment of disruption, to create a second acoustical space, in the room. It radically introduces another perspective onto the scene of listening – it forces me into this other situation. In this regard, what may appear to the side, is often also inside. It is in while being out, to force into view, through a type of friction, a spatial addition, or subtraction: we can never be sure. It is a procedure of continual animation.

Here I want to grab hold of and amplify a quote by Barry Truax and his formulation of acoustic communication. He writes: "the sound wave arriving at the ear is the analogue of the current state of the physical environment, because as the wave travels, it is changed by each interaction with the environment."³

In short, this sound here — has already changed by the time it reaches the back wall. Such a perspective must be heard to locate us within a condition of sonic and geographic intensity, turning every sound into a forceful and animating event, and every environment into a volatile and dynamic situation. If sound alters along its course, pulling and resounding the environment as it goes, it registers, while also delivering, a continual agitation onto that environment; refracting and reverberating, vibrating and echoing, pulling my attention this way and that way, connecting beyond what we often focus on – what may be underfoot, overhead, far away or suddenly so close. This for me is precisely

³ Barry Truax, *Acoustic Communication*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1994, 15.

what makes sound such an important material and platform – that it generates a situation of multiplicity.

2. The supplement

Continuing with this map of noise, my second coordinate would be that *noise challenges my sense of what I am listening for*. In other words, what I am expecting, what I am waiting for, is constantly supplemented by something else – by that sound there, and then, another there.

We can understand the supplement as something that adds onto something else; it is not a substitute, but rather the supplement introduces a critical addition. A sort of appendix that in adding onto an "original" object or action or phenomenon, enacts a type of rupture, emptying out the seemingly stable presence of what we imagine as being complete, whole, or immutable. In this regard, the supplementing force of noise brings into question the stability of an event and the expectation of fulfilled listening by introducing a *more than* onto the scene. Yet in doing so it also *pries open* the original, to undo the appearance of a stable meaningful reference. The supplement, in other words, makes the original available for sampling, for appropriation, for critique and comment.⁴

To return to the club, the talking happening over-here interfered with what I was expecting, with what I was waiting for – that is, the band; but in doing so, it also started to supplement the band, to make an appendix onto my listening, and in that moment, the full presence of the band, as the point of my attention, was undone: it's like being in a cinema during an intensely serious moment in a film, and someone in the audience starts laughing – this laughter, this noise, completely disrupts the scene, but it also begins something else: it says, every expectation, every hoping for, is also prone to surprise. This I find an extremely vital element to sound and listening: that the process of supplementing – *of that sound over there, and then suddenly there* – creates the possibility for another narrative, an opening precisely for what we did not expect and which might find its way in. This might be thought of as an echo to what Paul Carter calls "the erotic ambiguity of sound": for Carter, this ambiguity is precisely the exceeding of representation – a positive, productive ambiguity found within sound that generates what we might think of as "extra-expressivities": something that slips through, or overflows from an instant of representation: a body that might emerge from the crowd, to voice another view.⁵

3. Difference-making

Finally, my last coordinate would be, that noise introduces "the other" onto the scene. It brings the one that is over there to here, in front of me. This elaborates the idea of the supplement and the multiplying of perspectives, to suggest that noise, as *the over-here of*

⁴ For more on "the supplement" see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998, 141-164.

⁵ Paul Carter, "Ambiguous Traces, Mishearing, and Auditory Space." In *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*, ed. Veit Erlmann. Oxford: Berg, 2004: 43-63.

the here, delivers a confrontation with the unexpected. And if we have to give a name to this unexpected, to the supplement, I would propose we call it the stranger: the stranger in a sense gives a body to the over-here, a shape to the supplement, that also suggests a social situation, a negotiation as well as a meeting. I must attend to this figure here.

If noise multiplies perspectives, as a spatial acoustic, if it supplements what I am expecting, enabling or forcing other narratives, it does so by explicitly introducing something, or someone, I do not yet know. It is to bring to my attention something I was not waiting for – in other words, it is to introduce a difference.

I take this difference then as something which broadens my horizon: the multiplying of perspectives, the supplementing of representation, forces me to meet the one that is separate from me, but it does so by collapsing distance: this difference that is over-here, forces its way inside, that is, inside myself. It suddenly comes directly into me. As Steven Connor reminds: "The self defined in terms of hearing rather than sight is a self imaged not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noises, and musics travel."⁶ In this regard, the intensities of noise *others my horizon, it others my body*. Upon this map of noise then, the self defined in terms of hearing might be a self always already extra, an extra to itself, and one confronted by those that demand attention.

-

The acoustic experiences and productions that I'm attempting to narrate here opens out onto what I would term *radical sharing* – the making of a generative, messy space brought into play by the disjointedness of interruption, and where the singular body is disrupted by those around. Such disruption, as I'm keen to pose, reconfigures conventional understandings of the inside, or what is of my body, and an outside, what is of the crowd. The force of sound may act as a type of education precisely of this new configuration, as the unstable property of relationships and an economy of the in-between: a series of exchanges that are always passing across subjects and objects, between species and things.

I'd like to elaborate this thought by drawing on the work of cultural and urban historian Richard Sennett, and in particular his work *The Uses of Disorder* from 1970. In this work, Sennett makes a claim for "disorder" as a productive tool for nurturing social life, particularly within cities. As he states: "What is needed is to create cities where people are forced to confront each other so as to reconstitute public power [...]. The city must then be conceived as a social order of parts without a coherent, controllable whole form. [...] Rather, the creation of city spaces should be for varied, changeable use."⁷

What I take from Sennett is an extremely provocative inversion: while urban planners and social organizers may draw upon concepts of harmony, togetherness, of cohesion or consensus, as means for establishing community, as in the legacy of suburban development in the United States, Sennett in contrast sees disorder and discord

⁶ Steven Connor, "Sound and Self". In *Hearing History: A Reader*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004, 57.

⁷ Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life*. New York: Vintage Books, 1970, 141.

as productive for spaces of sharing, or simply, of being together. By agitating the lines that keep one type of demographic together, or that demarcate certain social territories, disorder allows for opportunities to experience precisely what or who is in contrast to myself. Such productive agitations are used to foster a spatial form composed by multiplicity. Place-making, in this way, can be enriched precisely through experiences of displacement.

I take all this actually as the very condition of listening in general. Might we appreciate the irksome interventions of noise as a discordant opportunity? One that might give way to new social encounters? Following Sennett, is not the irritating force of noise at times delivering explicitly what we might not understand, thereby affording contact with strangeness, which might actually allow me to hear the unthinkable?

I would suggest that to listen is to always already over-hear: it is to live within multiple perspectives, to experience noise, and to deal with strangers, even the stranger of oneself whose voice may suddenly overtake us. In this sense, I would propose that noise be thought of neither in terms of the private nor the public, not as this body here nor us there, but the production of what may still surprise us: the associations and unexpected solidarities found in acoustic disruption.