LAW AND THE SENSES

HEAR

Edited by Danilo Mandic, Caterina Nirta,
Andrea Pavoni, Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos

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Sonic Coexistence: Toward an Inclusive and Uncomfortable Atmosphere

Nicola Di Croce

1. Listening and Designing Urban Atmosphere

Venice, Autumn 2018

Every morning I meet a young African guy begging around the corner. Even when I look away his voice trembles and makes me tremble. The sorrow manifesting through his words is uncomfortable to me because it collides with my thoughts, it awakes me as from a sweet dream. 'Hey boss' he says, disclosing a hierarchy that places him at my mercy. Beyond any definition of pleasant and unpleasant this voice attracts my curiosity, yet it brings me outside my comfort zone, it makes me face what is other than me. His sonic presence is subtle; it resonates inside my body, makes my attention threshold higher, helps me reframing the idea of noise and nuisance, gives me unpredictable keys to access the complexity of the urban sonic environment.

Critical listening can support understanding *the other*, the unknown, and even the awkward; it can unveil the rhythms that structure everyday life. Following Lefebvre's rhythmanalitical project it is possible to claim that rhythms can '*express* the complexity of present societies',[1] the undergoing urban transformations and social dynamics. In fact, as every rhythm has its own pattern, it usually remains unnoticed as long as an occurrence changes its course. This happens for example 'when rhythms "of the other" make rhythm "of the self" impossible',[2] when a voice from a stranger suddenly undermines one's thoughts. This is why listening critically to the sonic environment can uncover the patterns that remain unnoticed, as every 'Rhythm appears as regulated time, governed by rational laws, but in contact with what is least rational in human being: the lived, the carnal, the body.'[3] Understanding the entanglement between the bodily (the sonic) perception and the normative system is central to this reflection as it involves processes of social formation and territorialisation.[4]

Firstly, body perceptions give access to the experienced character of a place, to its urban atmosphere. As stated by Böhme 'The atmosphere of a city is the subjective experience of urban reality which is shared by its people.

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[1] Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 2004), 44.

[2] Ibid., 99.

[3] Ibid., 9.

[4] Andrea Brighenti and Mattias Kärrholm, 'Beyond Rhythmanalysis: Toward a Territoriology of Rhythms and Melodies in Everyday Spatial Activities', *City, Territory and Architecture*, 5, no. 4 (2018): 1, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40410-018-0080-x.

They experience atmosphere as something objective, as a quality of the city.'[5] But how an atmosphere is structured, and more precisely how do everyday sounds shape urban atmosphere? The contribution of sound to urban atmosphere has been explored by many authors[6] who refer to the special ability performed by the sonic environment to influence the image of a place. Among others Feigenbaum and Kanngeiser state that: 'Sound creates atmospheres through its pitches, tones, volumes, frequencies and rhythms, which penetrate and travel through material and immaterial matter across distances, filling spaces within and between bodies'.[7] Influential studies have also demonstrated how human sounds enhance the attractiveness of public space,[8] even if the hubbub itself could be seen as uncomfortable by many dwellers if removed from its original context. The overlapping sounds of an urban situation often contribute to an atmosphere that is recognised as lively in so far as it shows it is a rich set of layers and reveals the presence of human activities. Following

[5] Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* (London: Routledge, 2016), 133, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315538181.

[6] See in particular Michael Gallagher, 'Sound as Affect: Difference, Power and Spatiality.' *Emotion, Space and Society* 20 (2016): 42–48, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2016.02.004. See also Michael Gallagher, Anja Kanngieser and Jonathan Prior, 'Listening Geographies: Landscape, Affect and Geotechnologies', *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no. 5 (2016): 618–637. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0309132516652952.

[7] Anna Feigenbaum and Anja Kanngieser, 'For a Politics of Atmospheric Governance', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 5, no.1 (2015): 82, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2043820614565873.

[8] See among others Francesco Aletta and Yan Kang, 'Towards an Urban Vibrancy Model: A Soundscape Approach', *Environmental Research and Public Health* 15 (2018): 1712, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15081712.

this line Wissman claims that 'The cacophonous mix of urban sound that surrounds us in an urban environment is usually not disturbing because what we hear is an integral and accepted part of the urban dweller's life.'[9] In fact, when talking about the urban vibrancy of a square or a street one may refer to its background noise, to the special buzz that animates public space giving voice to its protagonists and their sonorous everyday practices. No matter if the sonic environment is too loud or noisy: it is accepted as part of the routine, it is comfortable by a majority as it makes them participate in a shared yet contradictory space.[10]

The centrality of sounds in shaping people's everyday experience introduces the notions of *affective atmosphere* as a product of the interaction and mutual influence between human and non-human bodies. Following Anderson: 'Affective atmospheres are a class of experience that occur before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in-between subject/object distinctions.'[11] From a sonic perspective this includes what a body hears and immediately finds comfortable or uncomfortable beyond any cognitive process, therefore before a certain emotion emerges. Listening to everyday sounds means then

[9] Torsten Wissmann, *Geographies of Urban Sound* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 1.

[10] See: Mags Adams, Trevor Cox, Gemma Moore, Ben Croxford, Mohamed Refaee and Steve Sharples. 'Sustainable Soundscapes: Noise Policy and the Urban Experience.' *Urban Studies* 43, no. 13 (2006): 2385–2398, https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980600972504.

[11] Ben Anderson, 'Affective Atmospheres', *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, no. 2 (2009): 78. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2009.08.005.

encountering a multitude of stimuli that prior to being processed orient urbanites' experiences and actions. As accounted by Rodríguez Giralt, López Gómez, and García López: 'At any hour, sound and sonorous practices reveal themselves to us as a valuable means for ordering, attracting, advertising, complaining, limiting, affecting, silencing or producing a breaking point within urban life, which is already booming on its own.'[12] Central to this framework is the heterogeneity of urban sounds, especially when they contribute to fashion an affective situation where people are involved in a distinctive scene, participating to a 'soundsphere' – an atmospheric bubble.[13] In this sense sounds and (more widely) vibrations as 'affective tonalities' are not just passively part of the interaction between bodies, rather are actively influencing those bodies, their movements and feelings. As Goodman pointed out, '[a]ffective tonality can be felt as mood, ambience, or atmosphere. […] As such, and unlike an emotional state, affective tonality possesses, abducts, or envelops a subject rather than being possessed by one.'[14] Through Goodman's account it's clear how sounds and vibrations are crucial to acknowledge the politics of human interactions, as they are used to orient

[12] Israel Rodríguez Giralt, Daniel López Gómez, Noel García López. 'Conviction and Commotion: On Soundspheres, Technopolitics and Urban Spaces', in *Urban Assemblages: How Actor-Network Theory Changes Urban Studies*, ed. Ignacio Farías and Thomas Bender, 183. (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[13] Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres Volume I: Microspherology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

[14] Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound Affect and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 189.

affective atmospheres or even deployed as subtle and powerful weapons.[15]

How then is an atmosphere engineered? As suggested by Cobussen: 'Urban spaces are being politicized through design. They are being designed to invoke affective responses. Through a particular design of a sonic atmosphere, its impact as well as the ways in which it is experienced can be enhanced, decreased, stabilized, or altered.'[16] The policing of the sensible is then strictly tied to the institutional and normative system, to the set of norms and urban policies that surround and follow human everyday experience, or more precisely to what Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos defines as *lawscape*. As he suggests: 'The atmosphere of the lawscape is perfectly engineered to appear as a city that is guided by preference, choice, opportunity, freedom. Scratch the surface and you feel the law pushing all these preferences into corridors of affective movement, atmospherics of legal passion that are material through and through yet appear reassuringly distant and abstract.'[17] The effectiveness of lawscape can be found in its abstract yet affective value, in its atmospheric yet material formation. Within this framework – that of affective interactions and legal influences – citizens navigate in a multilayered sea of stimuli where their

[15] See also: Jordan Lacey, *Sonic Rupture: A Practice-led Approach to Urban Soundscape Design* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

[16] Marcel Cobussen, 'Towards a "New" Sonic Ecology'. Inaugural lecture of Auditory Culture at the Universiteit Leiden, 28 November 2016, https://cobussenma.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/cobussen-inaugural-text.pdf.

[17] Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 'Atmospheres of Law: Senses, Affects, Lawscapes', *Emotion, Space and Society* 7 (2013): 42. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2012.03.001.

attention is captured and guided by the affective qualities of the environment.[18] This is an environment where, as accurately expressed by Brighenti and Pavoni, urban (policy) design is 'tailoring various sensuous regimes to foster inclusion within an atmosphere that is meant to be comfortable, consensual, shared, convivial.'[19] A pleasant urban environment is likely to be the ultimate aim of those urban policies that are less and less tolerant to unfamiliar sensory stimuli,[20] and are thus tailoring a 'safe' urban environment that is meant to be comforting and entertaining – that which Thrift defines 'the security-entertainment complex' whose purpose is to 'mass produce phenomenological encounter.'[21]

Within such an immunised environment where the rhetoric of urban safety is exploited as to gain control of human interactions, dwellers are driven to avoid any form of stress and eventually get accustomed to a sanitised routine – an environment that still needs to catch their attention by entertaining them so as to perpetuate the logics of global capitalism. This brings to a perverse circle

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[18] Matthew G. Hannah, 'Attention and the Phenomenological Politics of Landscape', *Geografiska Annaler B* 95 (2013): 235–250. https://doi.org/10.1111/geob.12023.

[19] Andrea Brighenti and Andrea Pavoni, 'City of Unpleasant Feelings. Stress, Comfort and Animosity in Urban Life', *Social & Cultural Geography* 20, no. 2 (2017): 145. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1355065

[20] Catharina Thörn, 'Soft Policies of Exclusion: Entrepreneurial Strategies of Ambience and Control of Public Space in Gothenburg, Sweden', *Urban Geography* 32 (2011): 989–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1355065.

[21] Nigel Thrift, 'Lifeworld Inc – And What To Do About It', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 5. https://doi.org/10.1068%2Fd0310

of underexposure and overexposure to sensory stimuli which, as stated by Brighenti and Pavoni, 'results in an increased difficulty in experiencing urban space – hence, heightened levels of stress, anxiety and fear in public space.'[22] Therefore such urban environment leads citizens' everyday experience to a complex mix of stress and boredom, empowerment and adaptation, hyperesthesia and anesthesia; an artificial and 'immunological, "immersive" imaginary that multiplies the mismatch between a fiction of comfort and a reality of conflict.'[23] In order to tackle this mismatch the present reflection intends to focus on the possibility of uncomfortable sounds to challenge the 'comfort bubble', thus questioning the aestheticisation and anesthetisation of the (sonic) environment. The notion of uncomfortable is considered as a pivotal key to both reveal the hidden conflicts manifesting throughout public space and support the foundation of a politics of sonic coexistence. Here, sonic coexistence develops through an active and creative engagement with uncomfortable sounds as it invites citizens to critically listen and embrace those affective situations that manifest a sense of otherness.

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[22] Brighenti and Pavoni, 'City of Unpleasant Feelings', 145.

[23] Ibid., 145. Following Brighenti and Pavoni's account, urbanites are in constant search for sensible stimuli yet they are at the same time overwhelmed by those stimuli, therefore falling into a whirlpool that lead alternatively to boredom and depression (as for Sloterdijk) or overstimulation and anesthesia (as for Simmell). See: Peter Sloterdijk, *The World Interior of Capitalism: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization* (Malden: Polity Press, 2013). See also: Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1950).

2. Towards a Multi-species Sonic Ecology

Venice, Summer 2019

I realize I'm more and more attracted by the sound of kids playing loudly in Campo Santa Margherita; their voice, their everyday rhythm creating an atmosphere not entirely contaminated by tourists. Nonetheless I'm afraid this atmosphere will be disappearing year by year because of the loss of residents and young families in the island. I always pass through this place, trying not to step in the invisible football playground children build up with their bags – as not to interrupt their game. I particularly enjoy how the screams subvert the tranquillity of this silent city, and I always wonder why no one really complains. Is this buzz better than others? Is it better than the chatter produced by young people drinking and talking outside the cafes in the same place but just a few hours later having their aperitif? It's surprising how Campo Santa Margherita embraces such a plurality of voices, yet it's impressive how some of those are considered more pleasant than others. I feel like I'm in need of this place because of its contradictions, in need of its afternoon and evening atmosphere. That buzz profoundly affects me. I want to be part of it every day, even just for a few minutes.

By introducing the concept of sonic coexistence, uncomfortable sounds turn to be key to enter the agency and the affectivity of everyday sounds. In order to better outline the traits of sonic coexistence it is then essential to deal more widely with uncomfortable sounds rather than just noisy ones. This has to include not only polluting sonorities, but also unpleasant events and affective

situations that result as uncanny or unhomely[24] – that 'marks the disruptive presence of something unknown'[25] – even though they are not exactly accounted as noisy.

More generally, noise has been associated to the rise of modernity[26] and to the evolution of capitalism.[27] To some extent it is possible to argue how noise is more likely an evident form of discomfort. It is usually explicit[28] in the way it produces an immediate effect (a complaint for example); it manifests as an 'unhealthy' or harmful condition. This is why it has been regulated and monitored in the past century through quantitative parameters by noise zoning plans amongst other planning

[24] See: Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018). See also: Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. XVII*, 217–256 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1966).

[25] Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard and Tim Flohr Sørensen, 'Staging Atmospheres: Materiality, Culture, and the Texture of the In-between', *Emotion, Space and Society* 14 (2015): 34. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2014.11.002.

[26] See: Luigi Russolo, *L'arte dei rumori* (Milano: Edizioni futuriste di poesia, 1913). See also: R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1977).

[27] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[28] Even if noise is evident most of the time, it is worth mentioning, as shown by Goodman (ibid., 11), how inaudible frequencies such as infra and ultra-sounds are actually used as sonic weapons and can result in serious health damages (ibid., 20). About imperceptible sounds and the politics of frequency see: Mitchell Akiyama, 'Silent Alarm: The Mosquito Youth Deterrent and the Politics of Frequency', *Canadian Journal of Communication* 35 (2010): 455–471. https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2010v35n3a2261. See also: Kelly Ladd, 'Bad Vibrations: Infrasound, Sonic Hauntings, and Imperceptible Politics', in *The Acoustic City*, ed. Matthew Gandy and BJ Nilsen (Berlin: Jovis Verlag GmbH, 2014).

tools – although such tendency has been contested by many authors who argued for the importance of 'challenging the strategy of noise abatement which could produce a conformity of soundscape that homogenises place and dissolves local uniqueness'.[29] However, it is a matter of fact, according to the World Health Organization,[30] that noise pollution is a serious health hazard, especially for what regards cardiovascular disease, cognitive impairment, sleep disturbance, hearing problems and stress. Noise reduction has become a relevant strategic policy in the EU; particularly the European Environmental Agency[31] has declared the importance of preserving the acoustic quality of quiet urban spots within the built environment – those everyday quiet areas that bring benefits to city users in reason of their noiselessness.[32] Nevertheless, noise complaints remain a challenge for urban planning, especially because they make explicit the tensions between different cultural frameworks. For example, by mapping the noise complaints in different

[29] Adams et al., 'Sustainable Soundscapes', 2385.

[30] World Health Organization, 'Burden of Disease from Environmental Noise: Quantification of Healthy Life Years Lost in Europe', 2011. https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/136466/e94888.pdf.

[31] European Environmental Agency, 'Good practice guide on quiet areas', Technical Report n.4. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2014. https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/good-practice-guide-on-quiet-areas.

[32] Antonella Radicchi, 'Everyday quiet areas. What they mean and how they can be integrated in city planning processes' (paper presented at INTER-NOISE and NOISE-CON Congress and Conference, Chicago, USA, August 26–29 2018). See also: Antonella Radicchi, et al., 'Sound and the Healthy City', *Cities & Health* (2020). https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2020.1821980.

neighbourhoods of New York City, researchers Legewie and Schaeffer[33] revealed how the number of complaints increases in proximity to racial enclaves.[34] This is particularly relevant as it reveals the socio-economic tensions and the racial boundaries between communities; in other words illustrates how social polarisation manifests through uncomfortable sonic situations. The same logic is well displayed within gated communities, and more generally in those high income neighbourhoods where the sonic environment is carefully controlled and every source of disturbance suppressed. This is why noiselessness is considered as an extremely important economic feature and is preserved through alarms and other kind of (sonic) control devices.[35]

Besides noise complaints and evident sources of stress, this text intends to focus on the agency of those uncomfortable sounds that are subtly entering and orienting human body's feelings and actions, even when they cannot be unequivocally identified and controlled. Though those sounds are difficult to be categorised (as 'good' or 'bad' for example) as they respond to 'affective affinities' determined among other factors by 'audiosocial

[33] Joscha Legewie and Merlin Schaeffer, 'Contested Boundaries: Explaining Where Ethnoracial Diversity Provokes Neighborhood Conflict', *American Journal of Sociology* 122, no. 1 (2006): 125–161. https://doi.org/10.1086/686942

[34] Similar researches report that gentrified areas show among the highest rates of noise complaints. See Laura Bliss, 'Where New Yorkers Can't Stand the Racket', *City Lab*, 25 January 2016. https://www.citylab.com/design/2016/01/mapping-new-york-city-noise-complaints-311/426606

[35] Rowland Atkinson and Sarah Blandy, *Gated Communities: International Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2006).

predeterminations such as class, race, gender, and age.'[36] In fact, following Goodman's account predeterminations are central to understand the reception and processing of sounds from different economic and cultural perspectives. This is why it is interesting to stress the notion of *decorum*: the system of gestures and feelings considered as culturally appropriate by the majority. Thrift has retraced this notion arguing for 'a decisive change that has taken place in Western cultures as older ideas and practices of decorum, based on a notion of abstinence, have gradually been replaced by newer cultural frames which emphasise quite different ways of making sense of the world'.[37] Assuming that social and cultural frameworks have outlined behavioural limits also concerning the production and reception of uncomfortable sounds, then it is possible to address decorum as a constraint to plural expression; a limitation that now gives way to a novel and potentially uncomfortable sense-making. Therefore, from a sonic perspective noise-making can be seen as a cultural reaction to abstinence as well as an expression of cultural identity, whereas the understanding of uncomfortable sounds can inspire a new way of making sense of the world. This is particularly poignant as uncomfortable sounds challenge the normative system that regulates human sonic interactions – the set of urban policies and cultural settings governing sound emissions. In fact, beyond sound planning regulations, uncomfortable

[36] Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 191.
[37] Thrift, 'Lifeworld Inc', 14.

sounds can be absolutely 'legal' yet sharply questioning the *status quo*.[38]

As a form of resistance, performing uncomfortable sounds turns to be a political and aesthetic practice that contributes in shaping an inclusive urban atmosphere. This echoes in Thibaud's reflection when he questions 'how an ambiance-based approach positions itself, amidst the tension between planning strategies and inhabitant tactics, between the spheres of power and resistance movements.'[39] In particular, the idea of an inclusive atmosphere challenges the dogmatic understanding of sonic ecology[40] that rigidly counterposes noise and silence explicitly condemning the latter.[41] Beyond such a distinction, following Thompson, uncomfortable sounds need to be tackled through a 'relational, ethico-affective approach' that embraces 'noise as a productive, transformative force and a necessary component of material relations.'[42] Echoing Thompson's account it is pivotal to

[38] About the freedom of expression and the politics of listening see also: Davide Tidoni, 'A Balloon for the Barbican: Politics of Listening in the City of London', in *On Listening* ed. Angus Carlyle and Cathy Lane (Axminster: Uniformbooks, 2013).

[39] Jean-Paul Thibaud, 'Urban Ambiances as Common Ground?', *Lebenswelt, Aesthetics and Philosophy of Experience* 4, no. 1 (2014): 289–290. https://doi.org/10.13130/2240-9599/4205.

[40] Schafer, *The Soundscape*.

[41] In particular, Schafer (ibid.) defines and contrasts *hi-fi* soundscape to *lo-fi* soundscape. The former is described as the one in which every single sound diffused within the sonic environment is clearly recognisable by human perception, while the latter results in overlapping and noisy sounds that make them impossible to be acknowledged separately.

[42] Marie S. Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sounds: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (Doctoral Thesis, International Centre for Music Studies, Newcastle University, 2014), 2. https://theses.ncl

understand noise – and more broadly uncomfortable sounds – not as a negative feature of the sonic environment, rather as a political possibility for the listeners (the citizens) to re-consider their cultural framework thus empowering their ability to better understand the *other-than-them*.

To what extent are urbanites ready to critically accept uncomfortable sounds in multicultural cities? This question does not simply challenge the way to govern the level of 'permitted' noise pollution, rather it suggests the importance of developing a sonic awareness based on the acknowledgment of diversity.[43] Such an attitude toward 'otherness' – the way citizens position themselves among the multifaceted everyday sonic environment – recalls the need to advance the notion of ecology from a sonic perspective. 'Sonic ecology' has been described as the relationship between the sonic, the cultural, the social and the perceived environment. In particular Augoyard and Torgue defined it as: 'the interaction between the physical sound environment, the sound milieu of a socio-cultural community and the "internal soundscape" of every individual.'[44] Most of these definitions inevitably reflect a human-centred tendency; however it is crucial in this context to embrace a wider understanding of sonic

.ac.uk/jspui/bitstream/10443/2440/1/Thompson%2C%20M.%2014.pdf.

[43] Nicola Di Croce, 'Audible Everyday Practices as Listening Education', *Interference Journal* 5 (2016): 25–37. http://www.interferencejournal.org/audible-everyday-practices-as-listening-education.

[44] Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue, *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 9.

ecology that includes the affective capabilities of human sound, the 'voices' of non-human bodies as well as the vibrations of matter.[45] In this regard Cobussen calls for 'alternative ways of interaction between the environment, the human body and sound',[46] pointing out that 'The track towards a new sonic ecology is simultaneously a track towards a new social, political and ethical milieu.'[47] A multi-species sonic ecology thus needs to focus on the political implications of recognising equal rights to human and non-human audible expressions, which encompasses a new understanding of uncomfortable sounds.

In order to undermine the primacy of human agency over the sonic environment it's then pivotal to engage with a new sonic ecology that critically deals with uncomfortable sounds, thus embracing the plurality of human and non-human sonic expressions. Questioning the human disposition toward uncomfortable sounds can, in fact, lead to challenge the politics of attention that is so imbricated in urban design and sensory policies. Hence, moving toward a (policy) design-oriented perspective, a new understanding of uncomfortable sounds can contrast the apparent 'softness' of sensory policies – their 'more elastic and fluid form of power'.[48] This giving that 'the processes of aesthetisation that increasingly shape public and private spaces also entail the possibility of sharing and staging an atmosphere' which 'draws the attention to social

[45] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
[46] Cobussen, 'Towards a "New" Sonic Ecology', 4.
[47] Ibid., 12.
[48] Thörn, 'Soft Policies of Exclusion', 989.

and political manipulations of people's experience of their world, beyond the realm of the individual.'[49]

3. Attuning to Uncomfortable Sonic Atmosphere

Venice, Spring 2020

I keep walking, no one around. Suddenly I hear a voice, someone crossing my path talking to a friend on his cell. The topic is too predictable. It's surprising how in the past few days I was searching for a definition of affecting atmosphere, and now while listening to my steps reverberating in the narrow stone alleys I sense I am in front of my definition. A silent and leaden grey afternoon playing the presence of few steps, distant echoes coming out the interiors, and the absence of most of my everyday reference points. Apparently there's no uncomfortable sounds, they have been silenced by a norm. Yet what is uncomfortable is their disappearance, the empty space, the inconsistency of the sonic environment, the lack of a scapegoat to address my estrangement – no words to describe it. I am out of my border, unauthorised, following with curiosity the intensity of this moment.[50]

To inhabit a sonic world of strategies and tactics, of norms and loopholes, brings questions about how to address uncomfortable sounds; how to cope with the sense of otherness and estrangement that rises during unpredictable encounters and reverberates between bodies and the environment. Putting in the foreground the

[49] Bille, Bjerregaard and Sørensen, 'Staging Atmospheres', 1.

[50] Listen to the soundwalk here: http://www.venicesoundmap.eu/sounds/entry/282.

political ecology of urban atmosphere, it is crucial as stated by Thibaud not to 'ignore the increasing development of means of instrumentation and instrumentalisation of the sensory world.'[51] In other words it is central to think carefully about 'the public and cultural policies underpinning sensory planning, and [to] test hypotheses about the pacification, sanitisation and normalisation of shared sensory spaces.'[52] In this regard, so as not to conflict with a notion of sonic coexistence that critically aims to engage uncomfortable sounds, such policies and hypotheses need to be further explored.

A path towards sonic coexistence is not necessarily heading to pacification, sanitisation and normalisation of the urban atmosphere. In fact, sonic coexistence does not have to lead to a passive acceptance of others' expressions, rather to a critical encounter between distant social and cultural frameworks as well as distant species and matter. To that end sound and listening practice make room for such an encounter[53] activating and supporting forms of conflict, confrontation and fight between voices, cries and vibrations. This is particularly relevant when an unknown (uncanny, unhomely) sound reveals the sense of otherness that emerges from the margins (of society, but not only), yet it is systematically silenced as to preserve the status quo.[54] This might be the case of the cries

[51] Thibaud, 'Urban Ambiances as Common Ground?', 289–290.
[52] Ibid., 290.
[53] Nicola Di Croce, 'Sonic Empowerment: Reframing Atmosphere Through Sonic Urban Design', *Rukkuu. Studies in artistic Research* 13 (2020), https://dx.doi.org/10.22501/ruu.549598.
[54] Thörn, 'Soft Policies of Exclusion'.

of homeless people to be silenced[55] or their 'disturbing' presence to be evicted from commercial spaces through a soft and never explicit articulation of power that, by promoting attractive and inclusive spaces, excludes the most vulnerable minorities. The staging of urban atmosphere is central to this reflection as 'soft policies' often tend to normalize and sanitise the sonic environment by eradicating the sensory signs of disparities, yet affirming a precise power strategy. Indeed, following Allen '[p]ower in this instance works through the ambient qualities of the space, where the experience of it is itself the expression of power.'[56] Sound and listening practice are thus crucial tools to reveal the apparent softness of urban and cultural policies, especially when they tend to pacify and aestheticise the sensory environment. Urban and cultural policies therefore play a central role in the path toward a sonic coexistence. Their mission, beyond fostering vital forms of participation and collaboration, and beyond tackling social inclusion and fighting 'indifference',[57] need to support a sonic (and multi-sensory) attunement with the multifaceted dimensions of otherness – with the uncomfortable.

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[55] Nicola Di Croce, 'Sonic Territorialisation in Motion. Reporting From the Homeless Occupation of Public Space in Grenoble', *Ambiances International Journal* 3 (2017). https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.1001.

[56] John Allen, 'Ambient Power: Berlin's Potsdamer Platz and the Seductive Logic of Public Spaces', *Urban Studies* 43 (2006): 441. https://doi.org/10.1080%2F00420980500416982.

[57] Leonie Sandercock, 'Cities of (In)Difference and the Challenge for Planning', *disP – The Planning Review* 36, no. 140 (2000): 7–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/02513625.2000.10556728.

Listening to the uncanny sounds of the everyday environment with no escape – for example within a not sanitised sensory space – means getting the chance to approach and acknowledge alterity. Here, urban atmosphere can stand for a critical togetherness, 'a resonance between those who live together',[58] meaning that the staging of atmosphere can also be 'a way of being together, of sharing a social reality'.[59] Building upon an inclusive staging of urban atmosphere, the understanding of sonic coexistence requires a critical eye (and especially an ear) over urban and cultural policies, especially when culture-led urban regeneration processes make use of public art and relational aesthetics and when sound-related practices are used as to invigorate sonic awareness among citizens and institutions. In these cases, and more broadly when public art provides a means for social inclusion, even though it is assumed as through Deutsche that the 'task of democracy is to settle rather than sustain, conflict',[60] a politics of uncomfortable sounds – of sonic coexistence – is possible when 'something messier and contested may be required to facilitate transformation.'[61] Therefore to address sonic coexistence means to encourage

[58] Peter Sloterdijk, *Neither Sun nor Death* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 245. Cited in: Bille, Bjerregaard and Sørensen, 'Staging Atmospheres', 4.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 270. Cited in: Joanne Sharp, Venda L. Pollock, and Ronan Paddison, 'Just Art for a Just City: Public Art and Social Inclusion in Urban Regeneration', *Urban Studies* 42, nos. 5–6 (2005): 1004. https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980500106963.

[61] Venda L. Pollock and Joanne Sharp, 'Real Participation or the Tyranny of Participatory Practice? Public Art and Community Involvement in the Regeneration of the Raploch, Scotland',

forms of collective action that claim for an inclusive and plural sonic environment as a mirror of a just city.[62]

The notion of sonic coexistence finds a strong foundation in the possibilities of sound and listening as outlined by LaBelle. The artist and scholar mobilises sound 'as a structural base as well as speculative guide for engaging arguments about social and political struggle',[63] aiming for a 'critical and creative togetherness'[64] grounded on listening awareness. Central to his account is the concept of 'sonic agency' as a means for enabling emancipatory practices opening up new relational possibilities for embracing 'the figures of the invisible, the overheard, the itinerant, and the weak'.[65] Through his account he is then able to offer an unprecedented understanding of the uncomfortable, the uncanny, the unhomely sounds that pervade everyday experience, thus unfolding the agency of sound and listening. Approaching Bennett's lesson,[66] LaBelle points out that: 'Agency, as the capacity to affect the world around us, is thus interwoven into complex assemblage of materials and forces which, Bennett suggests, requires that one 'listen' – to perceive the nuanced and ever-changing relations in which the self is always embedded.'[67] Accordingly, listening practice leads to a deep understanding of the plurality of (human,

Urban Studies 49, no. 14 (2012): 3075. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042098012439112.

[62] Sharp, Pollock, Paddison, 'Just Art for a Just City'.

[63] LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 2.

[64] Ibid., 5.

[65] Ibid., 17.

[66] Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[67] LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 8.

non-human and material) relations which underpins the very foundation of a multi-species community.

The sonic togetherness suggested by LaBelle recalls the process of attuning to distant and unhomely voices and sounds, and echoes the concept of 'taqiyya' that artist Abu Hamdan[68] introduces as the basis of Druze religion. Investigating the politics of listening – especially the 'inaudible' voices cut out from free speech – Abu Hamdan finds in taqiyya the invitation to attune to the language and knowledge of any interlocutor and to accept/respect their speech: 'Tuning means here unifying. If Taqiyya is not based on unity, then it is a total misconception. You have to prepare people to be ready to listen to your knowledge.'[69] Spirit of adaptation and will to understand and 'blend into your surroundings'[70] makes taqiyya a precious approach toward coexistence. Such interpretation of mutual adaptation makes then room for a sonic togetherness – suitable for human interaction, yet envisioning new forms of engagement with non-human and matter[71] – that can radically shift the understanding towards an inclusive sonic environment and urban atmosphere.

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[68] Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *[inaudible] A Politics of Listening in 4 Acts* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

[69] Ibid., 39.

[70] Ibid., 40.

[71] See: Salomé Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound: Fragments of Listening* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 27. Voegelin relates to 'inhabited possibilities' in reference to a 'reciprocity of the heard' where: 'These inhabited possibilities also include non-human actors, their soundings and listening, to produce a plurality of worlds without the "hierarchy of humans"'.

From these premises sonic coexistence unfolds its political possibilities by tracing listening practice, as suggested by Voegelin, as a 'political practice that hears and generates alternatives.'[72] Moving toward a 'sonic cosmopolitanism' through a political imagination fostered by sound and listening, Voegelin does not aim for a sanitised and pacified sonic environment, rather she claims that 'The political possibility of sound [...] does not answer violence with anti-violence but with a shout that calls from the unseen different possibilities into being that activate desire and create the actions of a plural imagination.'[73] In other words 'This sonic imaginary does not limit its possibility to opposition, but generates an alternative […] it invites a listening to the breath as a continuous resonance of otherness in a shared space.'[74] Drawing from the resonances emerging within a plural and inclusive sonic environment, Voegelin is of great help in advancing a sonic acknowledgement of the invisible that is deeply political as it brings out 'what remains unheard', thus opening 'politics, political actions, decisions and institutions to the plural slices of this world.'[75]

Exercising a political imagination informed by sound and listening practice can, in conclusion, orient individuals and eventually the political discourse as well as urban policy-making to address uncomfortable sounds and uncanny atmospheres in a radically inclusive manner. Inspiring a new understanding of otherness, sonic coexistence can

[72] Ibid., 29.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., 37–38.

finally encourage an uncomfortable yet deeply inclusive approach towards all the sounds and vibrations that humans, non-humans and matter share every day.

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