

Attuning to disturbance

Towards a Multi-species Sonic Ecology

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In this short essay I aim to critically advance the notion of sonic ecology by engaging the concept of affective atmosphere and questioning how a forthcoming politics can include the voice of non-human and material formations. Crossing different research fields and theoretical backgrounds, I will introduce a new understanding of disturbance and attunement to address creative forms of political negotiation.

Affective atmospheres and the exploitation of sensory experience

Affective atmospheres are deeply rooted in the experience of the environment as they embrace the material characters of a given situation while anticipating and paving the way for subjective states such as feelings and emotions to emerge. More particularly, an affective atmosphere has been defined as a

class of experience that occurs before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in-between subject/object distinctions.¹

In other words, what is commonly described as the *character* of a place or a *sense of place* can be seen as the energy or intensity crossing bodies and matter, which has the capability to influence, and be influenced by, those (organic or inorganic) bodies – “the *power* (or potential) to affect or being affected”.² It is important to mention how this “power” to orientate human bodies’ experience of the environment has been proven to manifest before the emergence of feelings and emotions.³ In this sense it’s crucial to acknowledge the

difference between categories of affect, as a field of pre-personal intensity; feeling, as that intensity registered in sensing bodies; and emotion, as the socio-cultural expression of that felt intensity.⁴

¹ Ben Anderson, “Affective atmospheres”, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2, 2, (2009), p.78.

² Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p.15.

³ Nigel Thrift, “Intensities of feeling: Towards a spatial politics of affect”, *Geografiska Annaler*, 86, 1, (2004), pp. 57–78.

⁴ Derek P. McCormack, “Engineering Affective Atmospheres on the Moving Geographies of the 1897 Andrée Expedition”, *Cultural Geographies*, 15, 4, (2008), p.414.

Drawing from this framework, I investigate everyday urban sounds as key components of affective atmospheres. In fact, these sounds have an active role in the interaction between organic and inorganic entities because they are capable of navigating through bodies and impacting their behaviours. In a nutshell, “sound does not just connect things; it changes them”.⁵ Introducing sounds’ power or agency, I argue that listening closely to affective atmospheres can be pivotal to access the formation of those everyday situations where the sensory environment is intentionally “manipulated to achieve social, political, and economic goals by tapping into people’s emotions and affects”.⁶ To this extent, the exploitation of affective responses for specific atmospheres has been revealed to be crucial for the development of a neoliberal culture and economy – that of an all-encompassing “security-entertainment complex” that aims to “mass-produce phenomenological encounter”.⁷ By understanding affective atmospheres as the battleground of a new subtle and seductive form of *ambient* power, I wish to draw attention to the shape of the everyday sonic environment as a place to study power dynamics and experiment with new political alternatives.⁸

Walking through a shopping mall or along a commercial street, crossing a touristic city centre or a gentrified neighbourhood, the perceived features of the environment are often finely shaped to impact public behaviours. For example, because background music deeply affects consumers’ experience, it is frequently used to reinforce the commercial attractiveness of stores or shopping districts. In this sense, ambient power is

tailoring various sensuous regimes to foster inclusion within an atmosphere that is meant to be comfortable, consensual, shared, convivial.⁹

In order to fashion a comfortable experience to meet people’s demands for security and entertainment, sound emissions that are considered sources of nuisance are often restricted or silenced. So-called “inappropriate” sounds are banned to preserve the ambience of valuable areas – as in the case of begging and busking, which are illegal or strictly regulated in many contexts. As a consequence, this seductive logic of power reverberates in

⁵ Anja Kanngieser, “Geopolitics and the Anthropocene: Five Propositions for Sound”, *GeoHumanities*, 1, 1, (2015), p.81.

⁶ 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), p. 7.

⁷ Nigel Thrift, “Lifeworld Inc – And what to do about it”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29, (2011), p.5.

⁸ John Allen, “Ambient power: Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz and the seductive logic of public spaces”, *Urban Studies*, 43, (2006), pp.441-455.

⁹ Andrea Brighenti, and Andrea Pavoni, “City of unpleasant feelings. Stress, comfort and animosity in urban life”, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 20, 2, (2017), p.145.

the increasing development of means of instrumentation and instrumentalisation of the sensory world [and in] the pacification, sanitisation and normalisation of shared sensory spaces.¹⁰

Within an urban atmosphere where differences tend to disappear along with unexpected and potentially conflicting situations, I claim that city users may be losing the ability to experience a more diversified – and even uncomfortable – sonic environment. I posit, in fact, that missing the opportunity to confront *otherness* cannot but worsen the increasing inequalities not only among humans but also between humans, non-humans and matter.

Engaging disturbance

By focusing on the potential of disturbance to overcome the anesthetisation of urban atmosphere, I believe that addressing disturbing sounds and vibrations can reframe the relationship between humans, non-humans and matter towards a new form of sonic coexistence. Since sounds' agency or affective capability is often exploited to reach economic and political targets – that are leading to a serious growth of social exclusion – I stand for sonic coexistence as an inclusive model for reconsidering human, non-human and matter relations. The uncomfortable, the unlikely, the unhomey and the unpleasant are constantly rejected from human experience, because confronting the unknown makes explicit the differences in treatment among humans (based on economic status, gender, religion, etc.) as well as between humans and other bodies and materialities (as rendered by the extinction of endangered species, or by environmental crises).

Following this line, a disturbing sound may be the continuous barking of a dog owned by a group of people experiencing homelessness heard by a passer-by; or a traditional song diffused within a neighbourhood under gentrification that is judged a nuisance by a high-income newcomer; but it can also be the cracking of icebergs or glaciers, breaking the silence on a remote coast. Addressing and understanding disturbing sounds – dealing with voices that could potentially disrupt the status quo – can initiate a process of rebalancing power relations. It can, furthermore, allow for the proposal of new forms of interaction among parties that are unable to enter into discussion or find agreement (at least from a human perspective).

Disturbance has been defined as “a change in environmental conditions that causes a pronounced change in an ecosystem”.¹¹ Through such change “disturbance opens the terrain for transformative encounters, making new landscape assemblages possible”.¹² Agreeing that any process of ecological restoration demands disturbance, transformative encounters turn out to be crucial for increasing the diversity and performance of an

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Thibaud, “Urban ambiances as common ground?”, *Lebenswelt, Aesthetics and Philosophy of Experience*, 4, 1, (2014), pp.289–290.

¹¹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p.160.

¹² *Ibid.*

ecosystem.¹³ In this regard, disturbance can be seen as a creative force that reverberates across bodies and materialities; its sonic and vibrant nature provides a multi-species means of communication. It is, however, a communication that implies a constant and challenging confrontation with diversity, with affective situations that stimulate uncomfortable or uncanny reactions. In this sense, listening to such situations is key, since sound is not just about hearing and responding, or communicating. It is about becoming aware of registers that are unfamiliar, inaccessible, and maybe even monstrous; registers that are wholly indifferent to the play of human drama.¹⁴

Echoing the recommendation that “the track towards a new sonic ecology is simultaneously a track towards a new social, political and ethical milieu”¹⁵, I posit that becoming aware of other registers can contribute to decentralising the human dominant perspective. It can likewise afford non-human and material agencies to participate in an inclusive political ecology, considering that

the ‘object’ of political ecology is the coming-together or belonging-together of processually unique and divergent forms of life. Its object is ‘symbiosis’ along the full length of the nature–culture continuum.¹⁶

In this regard, disturbing sounds and vibrations introduce a new politics of coexistence precisely because nuisances have always been governed from a human-centred perspective, and particularly the perspective of the most privileged. Challenging the privileges of powerful groups can thus interfere and disrupt the neoliberal culture of private fulfillment over collective stances.¹⁷

A critical understanding of disturbance may, in other words, tackle the hierarchies of power, questioning the priorities of a forthcoming political agenda; one that includes non-human and material *voices* and tunes in their affective intensities.

Attuning to the affective intensities of bodies

Introducing the concept of sonic coexistence as an active and creative process of attunement to disturbing sounds questions the very definition of (privileged) human-

¹³ Ibid. p.152.

¹⁴ Anja Kanngieser, “Geopolitics and the Anthropocene: Five Propositions for Sound”, *GeoHumanities*, 1, 1, (2015), p.81.

¹⁵ Marcel Cobussen, “Towards a ‘New’ Sonic Ecology”. Inaugural lecture of Auditory Culture at the Universiteit Leiden, November 28, 2016, p.12, online, accessible at <<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/geesteswetenschappen/acpa/oratie-marcel-cobussen.pdf>> (Last accessed 17.05.21).

¹⁶ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p.255.

¹⁷ Sara Ahmed, “Creating Disturbance: Feminism, Happiness and Affective Differences” in Liljeström and Paasonen (eds.) *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences*, (London: Routledge, 2010), pp.31–44.

oriented disturbance. From whose perspective is the idea of disturbance defined? When does a sound become too disturbing? Such questions draw attention to the fact that “no single standard for assessing disturbance is possible; disturbance matters in relation to how we live”.¹⁸

Since the affective capability of uncomfortable and uncanny sounds goes beyond any quantitative standard regulating noise emissions, a multi-species sonic ecology suggests new forms of interaction: the development of an original sense of attunement. To this end, attunement seems to be the most promising form of interaction among bodies and matter, especially when they don't possess a voice that humans can amplify or possibly decode. In fact, “the concept of attunement speaks to subtle, affective modulations in the relations between different bodies”, and therefore can introduce a new method of listening that invites resonances between multiple interacting bodies rather than simply interpreting one voice.¹⁹ Here, sounds and vibrations play a key role as they embody a universal language: a vibrant energy, or a connecting factor which holds a musicality that in fact has been used – through radio signals for example – to search for possible communications with alien life forms on other planets.²⁰

Attuning to disturbance entails the possibility of listening as a creative approach to otherness. Listening practice is thus the first step to challenging social exclusion and anthropocentrism towards a “critical and creative togetherness”, as

sound is a medium enabling animate contact that, in oscillating and vibrating over and through all types of bodies and things, produces complex ecologies of matter and energy, subjects and objects.²¹

Hence, listening to these complex ecologies encourages us to enter the relations between human, non-human and matter, and accordingly to question the notion of identity – the way the self is considered as autonomous or independent from other entities. In this direction, new developments in biology confirm how ecosystems are inextricably intertwined, as

for humans, identifying where one individual stops and another starts is not generally something we think about. It is usually taken for granted – within modern industrial societies, at least – that we start where our bodies begin and stop where our bodies end.²²

¹⁸ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p.161.

¹⁹ Julian Brigstocke, and Tehseen Noorani, “Posthuman Attunements: Aesthetics, Authority and the Arts of Creative Listening”, *GeoHumanities*, 2, 1, (2016), p.1.

²⁰ Daniel Oberhaus, *Extraterrestrial languages*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT University Press, 2019).

²¹ Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency. Sound and Emergent forms of Resistance*, (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018), pp. 5–7.

²² Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled life. How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures*, (New York: Random House, 2020), p.22.

Questioning the boundaries that separate individuals from the rest of the world helps us approach a sense of togetherness that may demand a new politics which acknowledges the relevance of more-than-human issues and overcomes anthropocentric positions. In this sense, a multi-species sonic ecology does not simply involve the preservation of wildlife sounds, rather it initiates a dialogue between organic and inorganic bodies.²³ Following this line, Jane Bennet asks “how would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?”²⁴ By accepting more-than-human agencies – by attuning to the entanglements of affective intensities – listening can meaningfully drive a multi-species sonic ecology. An ecology where

the politics and practices of forms of creative listening to more-than-human life and material agency [...] question how nonhuman actors can make authoritative demands for human ethical and political response.²⁵

Addressing creative forms of political negotiation

Resonating with unfamiliar and disturbing sounds and vibrations introduces a new form of attunement with otherness, whereby a listening practice underpins the foundation of a multi-species sonic ecology. Within this framework, listening – here intended as “a continuous resonance of otherness in a shared space” – suggests a political response that requires an imaginative capability: the possibility to render possible worlds, to make them thinkable.²⁶ In other words listening “offers a portal into difference and the differently real and allows us to hear alternative slices on an equal track, as a real sonic fiction”.²⁷ Therefore, a different and inclusive reality is likely one in which human hierarchy is challenged by non-human actors gaining agency and a political voice. In this regard, “the possibility of a politics of sound is the possibility of a politics of the incomplete, the unfamiliar, the unrecognisable and the unheard”; one that goes beyond human hearing towards a sonic and vibrational attunement.²⁸

Since I claim that listening can be the first step towards a multi-species sonic ecology, I would also argue that such an ecology needs to embrace a deep political understanding of disturbing and uncomfortable sounds and vibrations. In line with this, I suggest that creative forms of negotiation among humans and more-than-humans need to be tested

²³ Michelle Comstock, and Mary E. Hocks, “The Sounds of Climate Change: Sonic Rhetoric in the Anthropocene, the Age of Human Impact”, *Rhetoric Review*, 35, 2, (2016), pp.165–75.

²⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p.viii.

²⁵ Julian Brigstocke, and Tehseen Noorani, “Posthuman Attunements: Aesthetics, Authority and the Arts of Creative Listening”, *GeoHumanities*, 2, 1, (2016), p.2.

²⁶ Salomé Voegelin, *The political Possibility of Sound: Fragments of Listening*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), p.29.

²⁷ Ibid. p.27.

²⁸ Ibid. p.35.

and sustained by a radically different urban policy approach: an approach that questions for whom any pre-existing “best practices” have been adopted; one that acknowledges the role of affective atmospheres as witnesses of a possible multi-species coexistence. Here, sound planning tools can play a significant part in shaping a more diverse and inclusive sonic environment where humans and more-than-humans negotiate their future together, thus suggesting “a post-anthropocentric way of thinking about place as not only as fluid or in flux but also as expressive of material agency”.²⁹

How can urban sound planning be radically transformed in order to better address otherness? Embracing the voices of different bodies and agencies – experimenting with new forms of co-authorship – can primarily help to decentralise the human’s primacy in the conceptualisation of disturbance and open political discussions to a plurality of affective intensities. From this perspective, how should new actors (vulnerable human groups as well as non-humans and matter) be included in the governance of the sonic environment? How can atmospheres be shaped according to non-human needs? And how can urban policies differently address sound emissions and noise complaints? These open questions foreground the future of a multi-species coexistence and demand a more radical and inclusive policy design approach: a creative form of dismantling otherness that develops a deep sonic awareness that can guide city users and institutions to attune to the affective tonalities of the urban environment, its voices and multi-species protagonists.

Bio

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²⁹ Michael Buser, “Thinking through non-representational and affective atmospheres in planning theory and practice”, *Planning Theory*, 13, 3, (2014), p.235.