

What Can We Learn from a Database of Quotes on the Sounds of Cities Collected from Travellers' Writings?

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Abstract

This paper presents a few considerations regarding a collection of sonic descriptions on European cities found in travellers' writings.

What can we learn from a collection of more than one hundred and fifty quotes of this kind?

- 1° The astonishment of certain practices of the past,
- 2° It brings old paintings, engravings of cities back to life, in a very vivid manner;
- 3° It also shows that these accounts come closer to the contemporary world, because
- 4° in all these descriptions, the only real instrument of measurement is Man and because our sensory "instruments" have not changed in 5000 years, so that these texts speak so obviously to us.
- 5° If we have drawings that are 15.000 years of age and sculptures that much older, these quotes are the only acoustic experience prior to our modern methods of recording;
- 6° We can build sonic maps of old cities.

Keywords: travellers writings, sounds, perceptions, European cities

1. The project

The idea of creating a collection of texts concerning the sonic environment of European cities dates back to the reading of Murray Schafer's *The Tuning of the World*. This book left a profound mark on me, providing the initial spark for the development of this research.

So the evocation of the yelling street sellers in London, the tumultuous noise of Parisian streets, the complaints against street singers and the meaning of the different bell rhythms in Middle Age towns, the noise of the grinding wheels, the songs of the workers and all the sonic signals of the Middle Ages that Schafer uses in his book to illustrate what he calls "the soundscape", constituted a true discovery. At the same time, I felt he preached to the converted... The vivacity of those descriptions had moved me, as I found in them an urban life that was not spoken of in classes on the history of architecture and urban planning. It was the living reality of a given area, a given space, that often provoked my astonishment, as I said to myself "Ah, this is what it was like?"

The excitement of those descriptions encouraged me to enquire and find out more. Now, the great majority of publications concerning the role and importance of the senses in the past only mention 2 or 3 examples (therefore reinforcing the impact of Schafer's book). Coming to terms with this frustration, I decided to collect at least one hundred of such sonic descriptions with the aim to build a solid database from which we would have a more precise idea of the sonic ambiances of cities of the past and present.

(Since then, a website regrouping a considerable number of quotes has been created at the end of 2011: www.lavilledessens.net)

2. The choice of quotes

Wishing to maintain a phenomenological approach, I searched only for quotes from traveller's writings, personal letters or personal communications, excluding other literary quotes as I convinced myself that one could not trust the sonic imagery of authors of fiction, or the lyrical descriptions which originated from their excitement for sounds and noises.

On the other hand, another database regrouping literary descriptions of sonic ambiences had been built by Barry Truax: (<http://www.sfu.ca/~truax/>) "World Soundscape Project Sound References in Literature". The selection of these quotes is based essentially on novels and the Bible.

Why travellers' writings? Because it proves difficult to describe one's own town, the acous-tic milieu in which we bathe all the time. On the contrary, when we travel, we are surprised by an unknown smell, by the din that reigns in certain towns, by the freshness of the can-yon-like streets of Madrid. The encounter with a new town astonishes us, makes us aware of its difference, its singularity and all those things that we are not used to listening: un-usual sounds, noises, surprising or even unbearable sonorities.

Lived experience, the value of direct descriptions, is what I found in these texts, even though Henry James (1900, preface, p. IV.) goes so far as to say that it is "perception of surface".

As Paul de Musset (1964, intro, p. VII) and the marquis of Beaufort (1839, introduction) explain it:

The reader will pardon me if I will not speak to him of everything. I will only choose that which has most captured my attention: I will give my opinion and not that of my neighbor. Where I say: "such thing is", one must to understand such restriction as "according to my feeling"

I offer these letters to the public as I have written them, in the places I traversed. Quickly sketched under the fire of my impressions, I consider them of some utility, whereas any correction or elegance in style would only alter the frankness of my writings.

3. The problem of objectivity

Despite the subjectivity of these quotes, they provide, regrouped together, a more complete and sharper image of the soundscape of cities. Hyppolite Taine (1910), in his introduction to “Notes on England”, centers the essence of such annotations: *“The English have a very good habit, that of travelling to foreign countries and taking note of their impressions on their return home; these collected accounts complete each other and allow the verification of each other’s authenticity. I think it would be good to imitate our neighbors, and as for me, I try to do so. One should say what one has seen, and only that; observations, given they be personal and provided with the best of intentions, are always useful.”*

Of such descriptions written “with the best of intentions”, one can find the same sincerity in the letters of Victor Hugo, de Brosses, Viollet-le-Duc, and other authors who were never interested in publishing, like Henrica Rees Van Tets, André Jacobsen, ... whose travelling notes were only found at the end of the twentieth century. There are no effects, no exaggerations, only genuine descriptions of lived experience:

It is an astonishing thing, the immense difference that exists between seeing and hearing about: the sight of things themselves has an incomparable power on our soul; it leaves behind the tales, the descriptions and the most laborious studies. (de Beaufort, 1839, p186)

4. First impressions

Organised in sequence and in a simple chronological order, the quotes acquire a surprising form, which can be associated to a poetic of sensation and at the same time, to a long surrealist collage.

5. The effect

What do these texts provoke?

First of all, astonishment.

The astonishment to discover old customs so far from ours. I'm thinking about the case of the 30.000 dogs that prowled in the streets of Lisbon and that bothered William Beckford's sleep, something that we never see in paintings, engravings or drawings! (1986, p. 40) Also, the astonishment of things I did not know about or that I had never heard before, such as the noise complaints in Ancient Rome.

Secondly, they give new life to images of the past.

This regrouping of sonic descriptions, this physical and perceptual reading of cities, injects vivacity into the paintings we know, the engravings that everyone saw and that are silent. Assigning a quote to these silent images adds a human dimension. We all know architectural photographs and street views where people are rare, old squares photographed probably a Sunday morning to capture them empty. Even in silent movies showing the traffic of Parisian streets at the beginning of the twentieth century: "we see the noise, but we don't hear it" as Nooteboom writes (1993, p. 21).

Furthermore, these quotes are truly what we could call "memory activators":

Whether we want it or not, we have an active role in the reading of these texts, that makes us bring back life into images, offering a sonic dimension to pictures we thought we already knew very well.

Sometimes a detail can set off a series of questions or pushes us to new interpretations. For example, in 1933, a young English traveller called Patrick Leigh Fermor (2003, p. 45), writes that he is awakened by the noise of wooden shoes on the paving stone of a Dutch town. Immediately I mentally skim through illustrations, paintings, pictures of the beginning of the XX century where quite a large number of people were portrayed with wooden shoes, images where the hammering of the wooden shoes was absent.

When I read Victor Hugo (s.d. p. 414), who, looking at the city of Mayence along the Rhine one evening when all the noise had vanished, noted that only the sound of the 17 watermills was still functioning, I'm persuaded to look differently at the old engravings of this river.

Those texts tell of other lived experiences that have the ability to make us dream, to waken other memories, to recall other aspects of the urban space that do not appear in photographs.

This equally pushes us to reinterpret and to question certain buildings of the past. Con-fronted with the famous Falling Water House by Frank Lloyd Wright, how many architects ask themselves if this site is not in fact a highly noisy environment?

In what way do these accounts come closer to the contemporary world than one would think at first sight? How can they speak to us so directly?

This is the domain of perception, and refers mainly to 2 things:

1. we are in the domain of the human, “of the lived, perceived, felt” as psychologists say, and above all, in all these accounts, Man is the measure, the only instrument of perception. That’s why we feel so close to the authors, why these texts speak so obviously to us.
2. our sensory “instruments” have not changed in 5000 years. It’s because we have the same eyes, the same ears, the same nose that we can live again the same way certain colour experiences described by Goethe; experience the focalisation of sounds in the centre of a cupola, as in the hall of the Altes Museum in Berlin; feel the scale of the gesture in the paint-ings in Lascaux; live again the smell of the humid earth after the rain or the smell of freshly cut grass described by so many authors; or trace back the intentions of Greek architects when we look closely at the optical corrections of the Doric temples.

It is the same man that we find in those quotes, speaking of ancient cities, of disappeared areas and forgotten professions.

These accounts are the only sonic archives that we possess from distant periods in history.

If we have drawings that are 15.000 years old and sculptures that are much older, these quotes are the only evidence of acoustic experience prior to our modern methods of re-cording, which are little more than one hundred years old. We have an abundance of pictures showing life scenes in old towns, it is astonishing however, when looking at ancient paintings, drawings or old photographs showing streets populated by crowds of horses, onlookers, hawkers or market places full of people, to find them so silent and odourless. Those facts, so present in reality, once painted or depicted on paper, lose these characteristics and intensity. Crowds and horse hooves on paving stones become silent, streets become odourless and buildings lose the heat radiation of the sunrays.

All these characteristics so present in life, because invisible and transparent, they find themselves erased due to the fact that we are not able to represent them visually.

Hence the interest of those descriptions from travellers, of the complaints registered through the epochs and the fact that people were already complaining in Ancient Rome!

Finally, today we can build sound maps of old cities, tools that could help historians unveil aspects of daily living in earlier times.

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