

A Proposition Toward a Politics of Listening (Geographies and Atmospheres)

Anja Kanngieser

a.kanngieser@gold.ac.uk

Goldsmiths College, London, UK

Abstract

This paper explores some of the acoustic landscapes of Sector V New Town/Rajarhat: a quickly growing satellite city and special economic zone in West Bengal, Kolkata. Embedding these in their physical and economic geographies, this paper indicates the potential for incorporating a sonic method into how we approach and make sense of urban and urbanizing spaces. By playing with this tension between the affective and the semiotic, it argues for a perspective that brings the nuanced registers that listening requires to the analytical practices of the social sciences. Through such experimentation sound becomes a means to engage with, and elaborate upon, contemporary social-economic and political landscapes that require polyphonic and dynamic readings. At the same time the paper shows the importance of incorporating geo-economic and political critiques into sound discourses and practices.

Keywords: listening, geopolitics, Rajarhat, special economic zone, affect, atmospheres

1. Introduction

The sounds of a place reveal much of its conditions. By listening to a place we get a sense of the shifting terrains that make up its ecologies; an attention to the collective, spatial-temporal character of sound allows us to apprehend and understand the atmospheres of the places we witness, inhabit and move through (Thibaud 2011). Through careful listening we are able to encounter sound as a way of 'knowing', as an acoustemology.

In this paper I want to introduce a proposition on listening to atmospheres that has relevance for a relational materialist politics. By this I mean a politics that is attuned to the differential and unequal access to resources (such as work, housing, mobility, education, healthcare) and social relations that tend to be experienced and reproduced through processes of contemporary capital. Politics, as I am using it, is less orientated toward rigid systems that see capitalism as a 'thing' in the world, than toward the complex ways that such processes and conditions assemble and decompose; it is an understanding of capital as a way of relating and being affected. Sound is useful to this orientation precisely for its ability to accommodate such complexity, bringing together possibilities for affective and semiotic approaches. It is this specific combination – a capacity for attending to those highly contingent and contagious atmospheres of a place, and to infrastructural, discursive and material systems, that makes sound interesting for geo-politics.

In this paper I want to signal two elements of this proposition: firstly, the importance of sound to the unfolding of atmospheres, secondly, the practice of acoustemology and what it means for a political geography.

2. Listening to affective atmospheres

My research in New Town/Rajarhat took place in 2011 in the frame of Transit Labour, a project exploring the changes in forms of work in China, India and Australia during what has been termed the 'Asian Century' (www.transitlabour.asia). Of dual focus were the logistics and information industries. Along with another sound artist, Sophea Lerner, and architect/

geographer, Kate Hepworth, I undertook several days exploring the accelerating development of IT parks in the outskirts of Kolkata. We were working with the (Mahanirban) Calcutta Research Group – a collective of scholar-activists exploring issues of autonomy, human rights, women’s struggles, forced displacement and migration, conflicts and borders. During the course of our fieldwork we became aware of the acutely overlapping elements of these high tech construction and agricultural environments. These were both visible (concrete building sites overtaking fields) and invisible (rhythms of work relative to time, the intersectional usages of space). The atmospheres of the sites we visited articulated these environments in myriad ways, and the specific properties of sound played a significant role in this articulation.

Critical to understanding atmospheres, and the importance of sound to them, are interrelations of space, materiality and affect. Bodies, human and more-than-human, along with objects, architectures and sensory stimulants such as smells, colours, textures, tastes are fundamental for the production and situation of atmospheres. As Ben Anderson writes

atmospheres are generated by bodies – of multiple types – affecting one another as some form of ‘envelopment’ is produced. Affective qualities emanate from the assembling of the human bodies, discursive bodies, non-human bodies, and all the other bodies that make up everyday situations (2009, 80).

The emergence of atmospheres has been linked to the extra-individual, miasmatic intensity of affect. Sound pervades environments and situations in excess of any individual or group. It is affective in so far as it comes prior to cognitive and discursive comprehension, independent of ‘bodily modes’ and indifferent to emotional products or narrations. Sound propagates intensity; it arises out of and through exchange. Working within and across space and infrastructures, sound creates atmospheres through its vibrations, pitches, amplitudes, frequencies, harmonies and disharmonies, which may be conducive to particular embodied states.

Furthermore, the interactions of space with sound are necessarily effected by the vast quantities of objects, corporealities, situations, desires and ideologies that propel them. In this sense, sound both fills space and is filled by the spaces into which it is projected. If, as R. Murray Schafer argues, “the general acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of the social conditions which produce it” (1994, 7) then sounds are correlative to social contexts. We must take this further to suggest that political and economic conditions announce the character of the sonic environment at the same time as sounds iterate and

reflect aspects of a political culture. Where and how sound is heard tells us something of how geographies are categorized and allocated, by whom they are populated and in what capacity.

One way to explore the economic and political conditions of contemporary life is by extending what has been called an acoustemological approach – an acoustic knowing derived from the intersections of sound, space and place (Feld 1996, 97). This is relatively common in sound studies, however, more effort must be made to include critical political analysis alongside concerns of the aesthetic, social and cultural.

3. Listening to New Town/ Rajarhat

Acoustic landscapes underscore the highly textured topographies of a space. The sites we visited in New Town were in the process of transition. These were predominantly areas with recent histories of conflict – state-assisted corporate acquisition of land and resources for the development of commercial and housing infrastructure. Established in the 1990's New Town is a planned satellite city directed toward the IT industries, built on cultivable land with water bodies formerly (and still currently) used for subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry. The signs of displacement are apparent; alongside the skeletons of business industrial centres and apartment buildings were farmers tending to small plots of land and moving rubble. What struck me across the different sites I visited were the tight consolidations of rural and urban sounds– which rather than being exceptional in their interruptive patterns, seemed integral to the rhythms of labour and reproduction. The particular assemblages of people and objects in these spaces, the ways that space is interpolated, were audible, oftentimes even more so than they were visible. The enmeshing of rural and urban acoustic landscapes were evocative of the transversals, complicities and antagonisms that such construction processes engender.

The three building sites we encountered were in various stages of development. While from the outside they appeared frenetic and were surrounded by heavily populated roads and shops, they contained vast stillness: long tracts of concrete lying inert, clanging heard only through far off echoes. This stillness was intersected by concentrated nodes of activity

apprehended acousmatically: a room full of workers arc welding, children pushing wheelbarrows over stone and dirt mounds, a security guard singing while walking through a half finished car-park, the splashing and thudding as a group of men heaved mud onto the bank of a lake, dozens of cows grazing in the background only a few miles away from corporate buildings.

The mobilities and interstices of noise and silence on re-listening highlights the concatenations of activity and stillness within these processes. To recall Blesser and Salter (2007), we sense dimensions of depth and size in the resonances of rooms, steel and concrete frames, the clatters of heavily populated food stalls, the thick passing of traffic. In the satellite city of Rajarhat one starkly hears the tensions unfolding primitive accumulation into neoliberal urban commerce and the daily rhythm of its progression through the tenors of voiced instructions and conversations, the amplitude and speed of construction, but also the stalling and evacuation of sound. We also hear our own interruptions, the mishandling of recording devices, buzzing from a broken microphone, weather interference, dialogues, and our often failed negotiations to enter property.

4. Conclusion

There are a few points I would like to emphasise here on how an acoustic analysis can be generative for the economic social sciences. The first has to do with the forces of power such a reading illustrates. The sonic elements that constitute the landscape are products of value systems articulated in this case through practices of accumulation by dispossession, re-territorialisation and employment, embedded in capital expansion. By paying attention to the compositions of a place we can hear how power is critical to the everyday unfoldings of geographies. Secondly an acoustemological approach definitively reminds us that the production and reception of knowledge – in this case through listening – is never passive, nor are the technologies used to record, transduce, edit, playback and disseminate it. How knowledge, here sound, is framed and analysed, speaks to dynamics of power, and this is in no way obfuscated. Thirdly, such an approach can help us to experiment with polyphonic epistemological (re)productions in that the landscapes of sound are always shifting and

contextual. This helps us to hone a sensibility attenuated to the interpretative and creative activity of knowledge production at the same time as requiring us to be sensitive to the resonances and disjunctions we are exploring. I would argue that an orientation toward the sonic aspects of geo-political and economic processes opens up a means to work with dense materials in ways that do not seek to enclose or reduce their multivalencies, but that can hold in conjunction historical and contemporary tendencies with situational specificities.

To be sure, to usefully employ methods of acoustemology for listening to atmospheres we need to understand them in the same way as we do any empirical device – as infused with conditions and limitations that require hesitation and questions rather than definitive assertion. If we are to approach sound as a way of knowing we need to reflect on what it reveals about the stakes of our hearing. We have to ask: what does it mean to listen, to be a listener, and to produce sound as knowledge? How do we recognise the moment of recording for what it is, one moment in a world of many, affected by the technologies of digitisation, interpretation, editing? And if we acknowledge this, how can we discover and unravel the threads of what we are hearing while we translate them? Attention to the soundings of atmospheres can contribute to a practice of research that is finer in its reading. This is a useful perspective to take if we wish to engage the relational and material political elements that contribute to these atmospheres, and the differential economies of sound that in part compose them.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Ben.** 2009. "Affective atmospheres". *Emotion, Space and Society* 2(2): 77–81.
- Blesser, Barry and Salter, Linda Ruth.** 2007. *Spaces speak, are you listening? Experiencing aural architecture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Feld, Steven and Basso, Keith H.** eds. 1996. *Senses of Place*. Santa Fe: New Mexico: School of American Research Press.
- Schafer, Raymond Murray.** 1994. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester: Destiny Books.
- Thibaud, Jean Paul.** 2011. "The sensory fabric of urban ambiances". *Senses and Society* 6(2): 203–215.