

SOUND AND CULTURE: ACOUSTIC CARTOGRAPHIES AND SOUNDSCAPE

Madalena Oliveira, Pedro Portela & Eduardo Vicente

The idea that contemporary culture is defined by the hegemony of the image and by a regime of visibility crossing practically all extensions of life is consensual. “We are”, states Fabio la Rocca, “immersed in a ‘constellation’ of images structuring our daily experience of life, as a kind of imagery galaxy” (La Rocca, 2017, p. 36). In a perspective that includes the idea that verbal language gives more and more space to visual expression, the author suggests that “this is the time of images and of the pregnancy of imaginary, where the practical experience of daily life is also constructed through a visual disposition, through a visual modality of our relation with and through the world” (La Rocca, 2017, p. 36).

Image technologies, which inherited from photography the fascination with the iconic register of reality, competed throughout the 20th century to over-demand the sight sense. In this movement of monopolised attraction of vision, they contributed to a certain neglect of the ear, which history had already subsumed with arguments of association with hallucination and rumour. In a text where he recognises that “we are horrified by blindness, much more horrified than we are about deafness” and that “in the culture of visibility, the great fear is losing sight” as “the dish of the weighting balance of the senses totally hangs for the sight side” (Baitello, 2014, p. 135), Norval Baitello suggests that “contemporary culture and society treat sound as less noble, a kind of poor cousin, in the spectrum of codes of human communication” (Baitello, 2014, p. 135).

Perhaps that is why for several decades, communication studies were almost insensitive to sound as language. Although radio, the telephone and the sound cinema have marked the beginning of the mass media age, uniquely transforming the circulation of information between distant spaces, the truth is that from the cultural point of view, the sound expression has been an object of timid academic efforts. Even the consequences of digital convergence are, according to Juan José Perona Paez, “examined only from the point of view of reception and almost ignored from the point of view of sound, in a society in which the image is still more highlighted than other communicative stimuli” (Perona Paez, 2011, p. 64).

With the exception of music, which due to its artistic, anthropological and cultural dimension has always promoted important scientific compositions, sound as semiotic material has only recently attained some scientific “visibility”. In an edition of the *Journal of Sonic Studies* published in 2013 on sound epistemologies, Walter Gershon acknowledges that “sounds have long been an integral part of interpretive research” (Gershon, 2013). In a certain way, as a methodological resource, the sound record has been a particularly useful tool in the Social and Human Sciences for interviewing and life history

research and for ethnographic research in general. However, only recently, in the last two decades, sound has been considered as an object of study in itself, thanks in part to the development of the concept of “soundscapes” by R. Murray Schafer (Schafer, 1994) and to the radio studies that have faced a significant boost as a research field since the end of the 20th century.

If the scientific status of the image derives from its intimate connection with technique, that of sound is primarily defined as a return to the sensitive condition of experience. It is therefore to the primary assumption of sound as an information stimulus that we need to return to give it epistemological value, first as a source of perceptive impulses that reveal the surrounding environment, and then as a system of signs that are as subject to conventions as the words themselves.

In its physical dimension, sound is reverberation and vibration and has frequency and intensity. Despite its apparent intangibility, it is its materiality¹ that gives texture to the spaces – physical and emotional – we inhabit. The sense of emptiness, for example, that we experience in an unfurnished room is not only a consequence of what the eyes (do not) see, but also the result of the reverberation returned by the smooth walls. Emptiness is then perceptible to the eye, yet it is also a sensation produced in the ear by vibratory waves that do not touch (or resonate) in other objects. In *The sound handbook*, Tim Crook explains that the sound corresponds to a wider field of perception as “human ears are capable of picking up sound waves from all directions whereas sight is limited by the depth of field of the eye” (Crook, 2012, p. 15). The same could be said about these senses in the digital era, since the rectangular shape of the screen also limits the sight in a way that has no equivalent for the listening.

In its symbolic dimension, on the other hand, sound is also emotion and relationship and has reminiscent value and expressive qualities. The sound of a funeral bell, for example, can trigger affective memory in a far more intimate way than the evocative photo of someone who has passed away, as the way we listen is strongly tied to the way we experience emotions. From a cultural point of view, acoustic environments are thus defining modes of feeling and of making community by regulating not only our physical orientation in space, but also our imagery.

Introduced in 1996 by the anthropologist Steven Feld, the term “acoustemology” suggests that sound has epistemological value, corresponding to a sonic way of knowing and being in the world. On the other hand, being a way of mapping the frames of experience, the sound manifestations create affective bonds and produce sensations, define identities and give emotional thickness to the social and cultural dynamics, just as the tone of the voice defines the modulation of a dialogue.

By focusing on the sound textures of culture, this volume of the *Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais/Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies* attempts to integrate a set of theoretical and empirical contributions to reflect on the sound experience and the expressive

¹ Norval Baitello suggests that “if we consider the physical characteristics of sound, we will find that the reception of all sound occurs not only by a small piece of skin called the eardrum, but throughout the skin, and therefore hearing is a body operation and not just isolated” (Baitello, 2014, p. 142).

power of sound. The relation of acoustic languages to identity and memory; the complementarity between image and sound; the imaginative power of sound; the specific sonorities of different cultures, such as accents and music; the aesthetic production of sound; and the role media, and radio in particular, should play for the promotion of active listening are the topics that, directly or indirectly, the texts of this edition explore.

Grouped into three thematic sections, the nine articles integrated in this volume do not exhaust the energy that the act of listening encompasses whenever we use more than our corporal capacity to ear. We do not talk about acoustic ergonomics or sound museology, we do not listen to the sound of brands or the sound identity of products, and we do not tune in to radio narratives or rescue sounds at risk. From the fields of architecture, music, art, cinema, communication and journalism, however, we have assembled some of the arguments regarding why it is also important to speak of a culture of listening and why to be able to do so, we may need to develop certain specific skills that enable us to identify a way of *sharing* in sound.

In the first section, we are introduced to “Heard places”. Pedro Silva Marra, a professor at the Federal University of Espírito Santo, explores the acoustic environment of football fields, attempting to understand how the manipulation of sonorities contributes to building the football spectacle. Reflecting on the relationship between the crowd and the players, the coordinator of the Ateliê de Sonoridades Urbanas research group analyses four technical mediations that regulate the intensity and act on the temporalities of the match: acceleration, deceleration, inertia, and sonic torture. The author explains that through the contagious power of the refrains sung in the stadiums, the fans “learn how to emulate the sounds and develop forms to interfere in the dispute by means of sounds”.

In a proposal that intersects the visual display of both territory and sound, Cidália Ferreira Silva and Eugénia Aguiar Leite seek to transcribe the spatiality in sound. Interpreting two places – the centre of Guimarães and the place “between Brito and Silves” – the authors seek to prove the relationship between space and sound. They suggest that “a listener that has learnt the proposed language is able to create a mental image of the place without ever having visited it, by listening to a route’s sound”, just as, “when travelling through the territory, the observer is able to reproduce a mental soundscape, conceived by his transcription”.

Graziela Mello Viana provides an overview of the transformations in the urban textual landscape of Paris and its relationship with the new music of the Americas. Focusing specifically on samba and jazz, the author – a professor at the Federal University of Minas Gerais – seeks to understand what signs of Paris are in the songs sung by Brazilians and Americans. At the same time, she examines how these musical genres reconfigured the landscape of the French capital on façades and signs of dancing houses, posters for dancing and musical shows, and fashion.

The second group of articles, entitled “Echoes of imagination, identity and the real”, is introduced by a text from Seán Street, who explores how images can produce sounds. In a literary approach to the relations between seeing and hearing, the emeritus professor at the University of Bournemouth suggests that we have the ability to produce

sound from images, just as we make images from sound. Taking the work “The hunters in the snow” painted by Bruegel in 1565, Seán Street assumes that there is a soundscape parallel to the world represented in the image itself. Furthermore, he is convinced that “we hear with our ears, but we listen with our minds”, which is why, for the poet who is also the author, “radio, sound and poetry have kinship”.

Referring to the plurality of accents and musical genres which can be heard in the Portuguese-speaking space, in the second article in this section, Teresa Costa Alves makes an acoustic cutting of the sounds of the Portuguese language and the music from Lusophone countries. The author believes that “one of the most difficult characteristics of Portuguese for those who learn it as a foreign language is exactly its polyphonic character”. That is why, in her view, “sound can also interfere with socio-cultural connotations” to which the radio gives expression both through the accents that enable the identification of the origin of a programme and through the music which, in the Lusophone space, also expresses a unique richness of sonorities and roots.

In the domain of confluence between languages, Ana Isabel Reis, from the University of Porto, analyses how three Portuguese newspapers started to produce sound content and distribute it in podcasts. The objective of this work is to identify possible distinctive traits of the audio content produced by newspapers in a web environment, and the work examines initiatives promoted by *Público*, *Expresso* and *Observador* in terms of articulating written information with sound expression. Recognising the influence of the radio in the podcasts analysed, the author concludes that the Portuguese newspapers are still in an exploratory stage, a stage of experimentation, with the sound in these papers’ web pages being a secondary element. Ana Isabel Reis states that “audio is a product that is dually invisible: you cannot hear it, or see it, on newspapers’ websites”.

In the third group of articles, there are approaches that have in common the exploration of sound management options, both in music and in cinema, which constitute a kind of “Sound aesthetics”. Herom Vargas and Nilton Faria de Carvalho, from the Methodist University of São Paulo, listened to two DJ Dolores’ records and concluded that experimental pieces of electronic music articulate elements of different musical genres and demand the participation of the listener in the reconstruction of the musical narrative. The fact that it is composed of different cultural texts of which the reading suggests a kind of musical alterity makes the music of this *disc jockey* a production in “constant nomadic state”. For the authors, it is also the fact of slipping genre over genre, instrument over instrument and timbre over timbre in an effort to “rearticulate memory”, which makes this music a universal experience.

Also in the field of a sort of avant-garde music, although in a diverse way, Manuel Bogalheiro, a professor at the Lusophone University of Porto, presents a critical approach to the musical piece *Disintegration Loops* performed by William Basinski. Composed of fragments played in tape loops that gradually deteriorate, the musical work results from what the author calls “sound disintegration”, a consequence of the “physical disintegration” of the reel tapes to the form of “useless magnetic tatters”. Referring to Simondon’s perspective on the plasticity of form, as well as to Deleuze and Guattari’s

theory of technique, the professor shows that disintegration is ultimately a metaphor for the human nature.

Igor Araújo Porto and Miriam de Souza Rossini, from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, analyse the sonography of two films, *Ventos de Agosto* and *O Som ao Redor*, in which audio works to produce surprise. From these two examples, the authors return to Schafer's concept of "a low fidelity soundscape", applying it to the sound of cinema. Although "low fi" often connotes a "bad sound", as opposed to "high fi" that is associated with a "good sound", it is not on a matter of physical quality that the authors focus their approach, but on the possibility of suggesting another way of looking at the construction of space from what they call the "flat sound" of films.

The approach to audio as language combines itself with a sometimes-poetic expression about the effects of sound on the skin and emotions. That is why at the end of this edition of the *Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais/Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies*, we also advise the reading of a book that suggests how sound and poetry are related. Written in a tone more literary than scientific, *Sound poetics. Interaction and personal identity* of Seán Street, which Madalena Oliveira presents in the last pages of this volume, is a book about the reverberations and echoes that govern us, about the relation between what we hear and what we imagine, that is, between what we hear and the images we mentally give ourselves to see. That is why this is also a book on the textures that only the ear can apprehend or, in other words, on the acoustic side of the culture.

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