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# THE CITY AND THE OTHERS' SOUNDS

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We know that cities have their sounds. Albeit similar, it is possible to say that urban sounds are organized according to their singularities. Those sounds that are culturally determined, e.g., speech and its accents, regional musicality, among others, are more easily identified as "sound marks," in the sense that Schafer understands this phrase (specific sounds of a particular location). However, cities have different acoustic spaces, more or less chaotic, along with numerous factors. Thus, just as concrete, green areas (or lack of), and asphalt comprise different architectural and urban landscapes, urban soundscapes are also, paradoxically or not, different.

There has been talk about noise pollution, especially in large urban centers, for a very long time. However, the contemporary world is increasingly permeated by portable or fixed sound devices that motivate and propagate varied sounds in even more varied spaces. In this sense, regardless of how unique soundscapes are, portability has led to the continual movement of certain sounds. Nowadays, it should come as no surprise to hear the ringtone of a cell phone in the middle of the Amazon forest.

As a concept, "paisagem sonora" is the Portuguese translation of the neologism "soundscape," coined by Canadian composer and educator

Raymond Murray Schafer from the term landscape, which, in a nutshell, refers to the sound environment as a whole. This term was divulged through the World Soundscape Project, conceived in the late 1960s by a group of researchers from Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, headed by Schafer himself. Known worldwide, the project brought together researchers and practitioners from various fields of knowledge and countries around the purpose of "hearing the world," in order to investigate the relationship between humans and their environment sounds, in many different ways.

Schafer's concept of soundscape encompasses every portion of an acoustic environment. Consequently, we can either construe it as urban sounds and forest sounds forest or as a piece of music and a radio program. Schafer suggested that, regardless of the sound environment singled out as a field of study, it is urgent to promote a hearing gateway, since acoustic environments of a society can indicate the social conditions that produce them. They can also inform us where this society is going.

The impact of his concept was huge, giving rise to followers and critics. One of its complex issues proposed by Schafer concerns the idealist goal of "tuning the world." He stated that there had occurred a separation of man and nature after the industrial revolution. This had led to the loss of an "adequate" sound environment, which must be restored, as Schafer explained in his book *The Tuning of the World* (1977).<sup>1</sup>

In Brazil, Giuliano Obici has recently proposed an interesting approach to rethinking the notion of soundscape in *Condição da Escuta: mídias e territórios sonoros*<sup>2</sup> (Hearing Conditions: Media and Sound Territories), published in 2008. Starting from the assumption that the chaotic sounds of contemporary soundscapes, albeit constituting a negative force, can also be construed as a force for purposeful subversion, this theorist and musician also proposes, based on Deleuze and Guattari, the term "sound territory" as an alternative to Schafer's neologism. Obici believes that the Schaferean concept of "soundscape" is coupled to a "sound contemplation framework,"

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<sup>1</sup> In Brazil, this book was translated into Portuguese by Marisa Trench Fonterrada and published in 2001 by Editora UNESP, under the title of "A Afição do Mundo."

<sup>2</sup> OBICI, Giuliano. *Condição da Escuta: mídias e territórios sonoros*. Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras, 2008.

whereas his own notion of "sound territory" takes into account the unavoidable conditions of our subjection to hearing and of production and manufacturing of subjectivities, among other things.

While Schafer advocates a state of silence and that we have the right to be spared from the sounds of traffic and machinery, or any other unwanted sounds, Obici is interested in understanding the hearing condition as a whole, since, for him we are all— all the time — exposed to hearing something we did not choose to. Were it not so, our ears would have a sound-blocking device, such as eyelids, for example. For the author, both the multiplicity of contemporary sound apparatuses and the large urban agglomerations point to this condition.

A sound territory, according to Obici, is not just about the sounds that constitute an environment; it also encompasses the conformation of a "hearing environment." If we can expect to hear music at a concert hall, it is because a clear-cut relationship is constructed in this specific sound territory. Nonetheless, as questioned by the author: What should we expect to hear on the streets?

There are people who refuse to accept the urban chaos by establishing "other sound territories" through "mobile territories" made possible by the use of devices such as an mp3 player. No matter how many musical qualities are lost in this process, listening to this kind of device is an interesting mode of resisting as well as of adapting to other territories.

The issues raised herein are complex and a manuscript as brief as this cannot provide the necessary profoundness. Far from intending to advance a conclusion and running the risk of sounding simplistic, I would like to point that dealing exhaustively with what we do not expect to hear seems to be the most recurring feature of urban sound environments. In other words, that which is repetitive in all cities is not a specific sound (or sounds), but a potentially tense hearing condition. There are many more sounds in the world and, obviously, sounds that are pleasant to some will be annoying to others (and vice-versa), in ever increasing numbers.

Despite the aforementioned authors having pointed to the fact that hearing demands continual care, the challenge to dealing with urban sounds,

especially in developing countries, is anything but solved. We may be able to exert some kind of caution by paying more attention to our sound-producing actions. But, what about the others' sounds?