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A ESCUTA COMO ENCONTRO: AÇÃO E REFLEXÃO EM ESTUDO DE CAMPO COLETIVO LISTENING AS AN ENCOUNTER: ACTION AND REFLECTION IN A COLLECTIVE FIELD STUDY

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Abstract

The article discusses field research methods in actions carried out collectively, as a continuous movement of action and reflection, theory and practice, involving the listening of the urban space and its agents. We argue that such activities reaffirm the research act as a continuous process of dialogue and discussion, based on the experience of the CentroSP project field study, conducted by researchers from Nomads.usp in downtown Sao Paulo, Brazil. After a prologue that briefly examines issues imposed by the 2020 pandemic on field methods, the article introduces the CentroSP project and discusses listening activities in the field as collective practices that help to root research to reality.

Keywords: Sound, Listening, Method, Field research, Urban space

Prologue: on relationships between sound environment and field research methods in pandemic times

It is early June 2020. For some months now, we have been facing a global pandemic and its effects on academic research, especially those that resort to actions in the field. Therefore, while writing here about the sound environment, field research methods, and related subjects we could not fail to consider this tremendous background. However, the impossibility of historical distancing from the pandemic forces us to be brief to

avoid conjecturing. Thus, immersed in this current urgency, we seek, in this prologue, to contribute to highlight some relationship between sound surroundings, field research, and the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the new coronavirus that causes COVID-19.

From the enactment of security measures such as social distancing and confinement in several countries, it is possible to notice at least two reactions from researchers and artists in their approach to the urban sound environment. We can find calls for the production of reflection on sounds captured by the window, and on sounds captured in domestic interiors, both within the scope of mapping initiatives and gathering different types of sound recordings. As closer examples, we will mention here the project Con:finis by Nomads.usp (<http://www.nomads.usp.br/confinis>), The Great John Cage Project (<https://anchor.fm/greatjohncageproject>), the Ambient Isolation Project, by Al Sirkett (<https://www.ambientisolation.com/>), Interiorities - Sonic experiments from lockdown (<https://rtm.fm/shows/interiorities/>), From my window (<www.facebook.com/videozero.8>), Histórias Sonoras del Covid (https://paisajesensorial.com/index.php/project_list/historias-sonoras-del-covid19/), by the Paisaje Sensorial group, the Cartophonies project (cartophonies.fr) by the Cresson lab, and the project gathering artists invited by the Moreira Salles Institute, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, to a virtual exhibition on the confinement (<https://ims.com.br/convida/>). In between the sounds from the window and the sounds of home, the investigation of intimate, private, or domestic spaces, multiplies through the agency of sound and listening.

On the other hand, we see the concern of many researchers who, in turn, rethink the methods of their field research. A good example is a collaborative document initiated by Deborah Lupton (2020), which gathers references and choices of field research methods during the pandemic. In addition to issues regarding public health imperatives, the pandemic state and the constant health surveillance impose reflections on the methodological issues of the Humanities area as a whole. Concerns relating the pandemic to field research, sociability, relationships between body and space, biopolitics and surveillance techniques have been discussed in academic forums in the area, as for instance in scientific journals such as *Social Anthropology* (2020), *Psychology Studies* (2020), the conjuncture notes from the journal *Trabalho, Educação e Saúde [Work, Education, and Health]* (2020), or the *Coronavirus and Philosophers*, in the *European Psychoanalysis Journal* (2020). There are also thousands of online seminars, debates, conferences, and other online academic events, as well as articles and books that are still being produced at the time we are writing this article.

There is a double process in which researchers seek to understand the changes underway, by adapting or finding new methods for ongoing research. They try to transpose their field methods to different modalities of online communication, also considering issues of privacy and ethics, either concerning the application conditions of use or the privacy and domestic context of respondents (Lupton, 2020, Durand, Cunha, 2020). The moment also imposes problems on the interaction between researchers and respondents, especially in contexts with limited or no access at all to the Internet. The pandemic has shown even more clearly the inequalities in the social, racial, class, housing, and urban structure fields in Brazil (Santos, 2020, Goes, Ramos, Ferreira, 2020), as well as probably in other parts of the world. Thus, the moment also reaffirms the relevance of academic research to understand different social contexts, identifying and responding to the needs of vulnerable groups. Even more important becomes the notion of university extension that values the dialogue between university and society, placing different lore in collaboration for the progress of knowledge and the maturation of social transformations.

If field research and university extension were already being rethought and evaluated by researchers since well before the pandemic, this process was tremendously nurtured by the questions posed by the current context, which will reverberate for a long time to come. The experience of this first semester of 2020 reinforces the need for continuous reflection on methods, accompanied by a constant interaction between theory and practice so that we, researchers, can continue to approach and collaborate in different contexts and realities.

1 Introduction

In this article, we propose a reflection on listening as praxis, as a movement of both action and reflection, and its application in field research methods carried out collectively as a pedagogical practice. The article aims to present theoretical discussions resulting from the activities of the CentroSP project, reinforcing the act of researching as a continuous process of dialogue and discussion, fueled by listening.¹

The CentroSP project aimed to produce readings and understandings of dynamics of urban environments through the production of videos and sounds, bringing people from different contexts together. The project was developed in three moments: an initial one of field study, which grouped activities such as video capture, sound records, interviews, and discussion with participants about their experiences; a second phase in which the recorded sounds and videos were edited by the participants from their records and those available in the project's collective repository; and a final moment, in which the videos produced were screened to an

audience, together with a discussion between participants and attendants. The project brought together undergraduate and graduate students who investigated in the field a fragment of the República district, in the central area of the city of Sao Paulo, which had already been extensively studied in several previous projects by Nomads.usp. The fragment extends from Roosevelt Square to the Anhangabaú Park, in the West-East direction, and from Arouche Square to the Mário de Andrade Library, in the North-South direction, including places like the squares of República, Paissandu, and Ramos de Azevedo, the Chá Overpass and the João Goulart elevated highway.

This article focuses on the field study developed at the project's first moment, focusing particularly on the following activities: explaining to participants about the precepts of field study and the project activities, applying the soundwalk method, conducting interviews, capturing sounds, and discussing with participants about the activities carried out. Through methods such as soundwalk, interviews, and capturing sounds and videos, we tried to encourage encounters between differences by listening to the sound environment and local people, especially homeless people. In order to make the production of sound records accessible, the participants used smartphones and semi-professional equipment to perform sound and image records.

The field study was carried out by exploring two main elements: sound (listening and recording) and image (videorecording). Chosen as the capture medium, sound recording and video were able to induce contact between people from different realities, as well as allowing them to explore the representation potentialities of these ways of recording. In agreement with Doreen Massey (2005, 2008), when she argues that urban space is a multiplicity of encounters always in process, we understand the methods of field research as proposals for structuring part of these encounters. Encounters also imply questioning about the construction of the other (Ahmed, 2000), creating a reflective process that stimulates the recognition that we are part of the social world we have built (Atkinson, Hammersley, 2007).

The article is structured in three parts. The first one deals with the application of field research methods in the CentroSP project, especially those related to sound. The second part discusses the results of the application of such methods during the field study, seeking to understand the activities developed as collective practices that encourage listening and the encounter between differences. Finally, the third part deals with the discussion of potentialities and limits on listening as a modality of an encounter of differences.

2 CentroSP: field research methods

In the urban space, sounds can be interpreted as signs of events and movements in a given space-time, as well as cycles and organizational tendencies (Lefebvre, 2004). The sounds indicate the physical space configurations through acoustic phenomena, helping us to record, document, and describe the dynamics of an ambiance (Thibaud, 2011b), adding spatial and temporal characteristics to the registry. It is, therefore, possible to investigate events, situations, and contexts through sound and sound recording methods. As Thibaud argues, "With sounds – as with ambiances – we do not experience the world from the outside, in front of us, but through it, in accordance with it, as part of it." (Thibaud, 2011b, p. 7). Along with this idea of resonance, of getting involved, Thibaud (2011b) then argues that time is part of the nature of sound, and that sound recording is a record that brings together characteristics of temporality and physical space. When listening to an environment, we are, thus, listening to its development.

Sound participates in the constant construction of urban space, enabling contacts and encounters between human and non-human agents, forming a system of humans, objects, technologies, materials, infrastructures, and animals in interrelationship (Gallagher, Kanngieser, Prior, 2017). Sound practice and listening are methodological elements that can include sensitive effects to research and articulate them to a wider spectrum of spatial references (Roça, 2019), following the reasoning concerning ambiances.

Architecture does not only organize spaces indeed, but it also builds specific environments, it defines 'ambiances'. This founding aspect of the built space, which is often overlooked in architectural doctrines, also becomes increasingly important due to the evolution of techniques in construction, and the production of sensitive effects with which we become familiar day after day. (Chelkoff, 2001, p. 102, our translation².)

It is essential that the architectural and formal spectrum of space is articulated to a sociological perspective of ways of life, within an intrinsic relationship between built and social forms, taking into account a reciprocal configuration between spaces and practices (Grosjean, Thibaud, 2001). Being in the field will help us to understand the heterogeneity of conditions intrinsically articulated with each other. We have to revisit classic and consolidated research methods, rethink their uses, adapt them, seek methods that are complementary and appropriate to our research, recognizing the demands and limits of the field under study. Through experimentation, it is possible to perceive limits and potentialities in a sensitive way, combining socio-political

and sensory aspects. With its own theoretical basis, experimentation is no longer a stage of measurement in research, but also fosters and informs theoretical reflection.

In field research, problems and situations generate important reflections that possibly would not emerge without those methods. These processes bring the researcher closer to different social realities and demands, in addition to providing encounters which stimulate reflections on doing, in an interdisciplinary context.

3 Collective practices providing encounters

By concentrating the entire group of participants in a single, clearly defined area, collaborative work of capturing images and sounds becomes more intense both in dynamics as in quantity. It also becomes more diverse in quality and provides varied views on the same events or aspects of the neighborhood.



Fig. 1: Map of the República district, Sao Paulo, Brazil, highlighting the area covered by the field study. Source: Luciana Roça on a Google Earth satellite image.

The area defined in the República district which is too wide to be fully covered in the field study during a short period of immersion. However, we still preferred to keep these limits due to the complexity and diversity of symbolic-cultural territories present in the region (Hasbaert, 2004). This urban fragment houses several public agencies and social and cultural facilities of great importance for the entire city. The region is also the scene of several conflicts between social groups and the local government, largely related to the interests of real estate investors. The field investigations in the area were carried out as collective practices, by ten participants in addition to the Nomads.usp researchers, on November 13 and 14, 2017. The researchers proposed to the participants to make representations of the city through actions in the field and suggested to them ways of approaching the homeless population. The field activities were mainly structured by meetings in the morning for initial instructions, independent actions during the day, and a discussion about the experiences, in the late afternoon.

3.1 Collective soundwalk structuring the listener's experience

The soundwalk method can be performed in a variety of ways, always meeting two fundamental conditions: moving around the physical space, through the act of walking, and listening attentively to the sound environment. Although also used in artistic and pedagogical spheres, the soundwalk method is generally employed to enhance research objectives, as it can be seen in countless works (Westerkamp, 1974, Semidor, 2006, Vernet, Semidor, 2006, Gallagher, Prior, 2014, Butler, 2006, Southworth, 1969, Chattopadhyay, 2013, McCartney, 2014, Paquette, McCartney, 2012, Radicchi, 2017, Guillebaud, 2019, Simili, Rego, 2020, Henckel, 2019, *inter alios*). A soundwalk is an activity dedicated to listening to the sound environment and perceiving ambient transitions through sound. It is about learning a more attentive way of listening that relates researchers and ambiance, in an experienced practice. It highlights the relationships between social times, physical space, and multisensory. An important quality of the method is that "soundwalks take the everyday action of walking, and everyday sounds, and bring the attention of the audience to these often-ignored events, practices, and processes." (McCartney, 2014, p. 214). Actually, soundwalks can stimulate awareness about the environment by proposing to listen and to pay attention to the multisensory nuances of the journey (Butler, 2006).



Fig. 2: Soundwalk path performed with the participants. Source: Luciana Roça on a Google Earth satellite image.

The soundwalk path performed with the project's participants was previously defined, seeking to provide a varied sampling of the area and different transitions between sound environments. We tried to emphasize the state of attention to sounds and their qualities, going beyond their causality. Although performed collectively, a soundwalk is a silent group walk. Participants walked silently during the entire journey, without communicating with each other, and only at the end discussed their impressions. No record was made, either of image or sound, as all attention needed to be directed to the path and the understanding of the ambiances. The data collected was restricted to the participants' testimonies, in the final discussion.

According to their reports, the soundwalk was an invitation to experience the city in a way not imposed by everyday activities. The participants made comments referring to the visual, sound, and olfactory dimensions of the places covered, partially meeting the multisensory character. The differences between social times and their dynamics were strongly linked to the physical space, such as, for example, walking on the sidewalk, people talking in the squares, the voices, and fragments of conversations that came closer and went farther, according to each one's listening. The links between sound surroundings, social activities, and physical space were present in everyone's speech.

Although the participants were not instructed to qualify the sounds they heard, the comments expressed their difficulty in doing so. In the conversation, several references to the binary noise/silence emerge, often determining the quality of the sound from its source – for example, bird "song", bus "noise", people's "voices". This last observation, however, can also be a consequence of the strong relationality between physical space, social domain, and sensory domain, which also appeared in the comments. Participants reported they perceived social dynamics among people in narrative fragments, and also said they heard sounds that they did not previously imagine they would hear, as the sound of birds. They also commented that the attention paid to sound further highlights some activities, such as vehicle traffic and transitions from place to place. Among potentialities and limits, the soundwalk had research and political purposes (Radicchi, 2017). It was carried out aiming to structure the participants' listening experience, proposing a path, and directing attention to sounds and ambiances. The method showed the way in which one place differs from the other, and how our group was inserted in the local context when carrying out the route.

Additional approaches to walking and experiencing the city are proposed by several authors (Ingold, Vergunst, 2008, Pierce, Lawhon, 2015, Butler, 2006, Fortuna, 2018, Middleton, 2011, Jacques, 2012 inter alios). Further studies may complement the method, conducting interviews with inhabitants, such as the Commented Paths Method, or "méthode des parcours commentés" (Thibaud, 2001), as well as conducting walking interviews (Jones et al., 2008, Evans, Jones, 2011), or the go-along method (Kusenbach, 2003, Bergeron, Paquette, Poullaouec-Gonidec, 2014). There are also methods inspired by the situationist drift (Jacques, 2008, Chattopadhyay, 2013), or even by listening to sound records (Gallagher, 2015b). Finally, some methods prioritize the collection of comments about the sound environment, such as reactivated listening, or "l'écoute réactivée", proposed by Augoyard (2001), and the microphones-in-the-ears method (Battesti, 2017, Battesti, Puig, 2016). Such walks or soundwalks can be complemented in different ways, using data from GPS and GIS (Evans, Jones, 2011, Martini, 2020), or mind maps.

3.2 Sound recording as sensory texts

Sound recordings capture acoustic characteristics filtered by the intention of the person who records them. This means that recordings are representations of a place, produced in a reflective process that inserts the researchers in a given environment, which influences them and is influenced by them. Resulting from the interaction between researchers, sound environments, and ambiance, such recordings provide information

about a given context (Cusack, 2013), as ethnographic representations (Gallagher, 2015a, Drever, 2002, Rennie, 2014, 2015) that include listening practices. The sound recording in the field, as part of a larger phonographic practice (Roça, 2019, Gallagher, Prior, 2014, Gallagher, 2015a, Makagon, Neuman, 2009), is a way of approaching the process of building a subject.

We proposed to CentroSP participants to also make sound records, in addition to capturing videos. However, even though they showed interest in doing so, few records were made, except interviews. As none of them had a real sound recorder, we infer that the small number of records can be explained by two interdependent reasons. Due to technical limitations, their smartphones did not register sounds with the quality they would expect, decreasing their engagement. The main obstacle to producing good recordings was the quality of the microphone. It had a restriction on the frequencies captured and, therefore, demanded physical proximity to the sound source, facilitating, on the other hand, the recording of the voice in interviews. Such limitations were even more expressive when compared to the good possibilities of image recording.

3.3 Interviews as a listening exercise

The interviews were conducted by participants and researchers in a semi-structured manner with open questions. Based on previous research experiences from Nomads.usp, we proposed to the participants to conduct interviews with homeless people, and from other vulnerable social groups. Participants and researchers followed a protocol by firstly introducing themselves and the project, and asking for the interviewee's consent to make any record. The questions were about daily life, daily paths, their opinion on the neighborhood, and its sounds so that the participants could continue the conversation as a listening exercise. Participants' comments showed that some people did not give consent to be recorded but, still, they talked freely to the participants.

Semi-structured interviews as a listening exercise for interviewers resembled, in some cases, life history interviews (Atkinson, 1998). This type of interview is related to oral history methods, in which individuals tell about life experiences and remarkable events. In our case, the interviewees told us about events in the past related to their social condition or the urban space. As pointed out by Alan Bryman (2015), this method is subject to partiality due to distortions and lapses in memory. Nevertheless, on the other hand, it allows the emergence of discourses of marginalized people, thus considered for their lack of power or simply because they are seen as not exceptional.

In the CentroSP project, such stories fulfill the function of allowing "understanding our characteristics in common with others, as well as our differences" (Atkinson, 1998, p. 10). They help to build a mosaic of experiences about the neighborhood, from the record of collected narratives, as well as providing encounters between different people through the listening process. This real social role of conversation, of listening attentively to another who is marginalized in multiple ways in public spaces as in society, is a way of producing records of experiences and understandings of the world.

Noticeable in the participants' comments during the discussion about their experiences, at the end of the day, interviews and attentive listening allowed a great approximation to homeless people. Respondents showed great interest in telling us their stories, be they true or false. Often their speech was far removed from our questions, taking them only as an opportunity to express themselves or a chance to be heard. We also noticed a clear conflict concerning the recognition and acceptance, by non-homeless users, of their sonic, social, and visual presence. While these people are loudly present in the neighborhood, their social participation may be being denied. They can be heard, in the physiological sense of the term, but they are not heard, that is, they are not respected in the local public scene, if we understand listening as a more attentive process than listening.

3.4 Discussion of the activities

To end the day's activities, we held meetings bringing together researchers and participants to evaluate the actions and share experiences. The discussions were guided by the Nomads.usp researchers, who presented topics to be discussed and moderated the speeches. The video capture, sound records, and interviews were carried out in a decentralized way, in pairs, increasing the diversity and quantity of records, and qualitative data. This procedure is based on experience gained from previous Nomads.usp projects and research (Tramontano, 2019, Tramontano, Santos, 2013, Tramontano, Santos, 2012, Roça Et Al., 2015, Roça, 2019), and recognizes that each researcher and participant has unique and personal field experience. Thus, the collective investigation in the field is only completed when those involved get together, share, discuss, and evaluate their experiences together.

4 Conclusions: acting and reflecting

The practices and methods discussed in this article can contribute to educational practices aimed to qualify perceptions of public space through sound. They can also densify urban design practices through their ability to produce knowledge about events in the physical space. They help us to nuance the understanding of the role of the university as a social actor. And they can also contribute to formulating public policies, helping to recognize the social dynamics of public spaces' users and residents.

Moacir Gadotti (2017) argues that Paulo Freire's proposal to substitute the concept of extension for communication reiterates the idea of University Extension as knowledge production, as an articulated exchange of lore in which "extension should influence teaching and research and not be isolated between them" (Gadotti, 2017). This observation reminds us that extension actions are not aimed at the simple dissemination of academic knowledge, but at building "a scientific, technological and cultural production rooted in reality." (Idem). Encouraging encounters with differences, stimulating dialogue, and listening are much needed and urgent ways of bringing research and society together. These encounters may be in the place of origin of new interdisciplinary methods, which can be described and reapplied, able to be used in a didactic way, dealing with the sensitive and political aspects of the city's free spaces.

We are interested in situating such encounters in the interdependent relationship between theory and practice grounded on the notion of praxis, as constructed by Paulo Freire (1980): dialogue is an encounter that takes place in praxis, in the action-reflection articulation. Teaching and research practices connected to the extra-campus reality take shape from these meetings. We understand that the collective listening practices of the CentroSP project generated qualified encounters of researchers and participants with users and residents of the studied region, placing them in an ambiance and providing a beginning of dialogue in a sensitive exchange with the interviewees and space. By qualifying the contact between differences, listening becomes a political practice of teaching and research, valuing ties and influences apart from everyday life (Amin, 2004 apud Wilson, 2017).

We do not know how this pandemic will influence academic practices of field research from 2020 onwards. All security measures have operated and continue to operate in the opposite direction of the immense effort to build a culture of the commons in cities, which has lasted for the past hundred years. In this first semester of 2020, urban populations from all over the world saw the legitimization of multiple forms of exclusion of differences, by maintaining social distance from strangers, by ostensibly rejecting homeless people, by quickly closing the car window at the red traffic light, by preferring their private car to public transportation, by locking themselves at home and communicating with the world only through deliverers. With or without a vaccine, the future of the construction of the common promises to be hard, since so many fears and social distances eventually have been indirectly endorsed by science, in a process still ongoing with little predictable consequences.

Collective forms of knowledge production involving extra-campus communities are indeed threatened. They were already before this tragedy, but now they need to be reformulated, the discourse in their favor needs to be reconstructed. Differences still need to be brought into dialogue, perhaps even more now than before. We need methodologies that encourage and qualify this dialogue, which reaffirm the importance of the co-presence of differences interacting in the public space, and that help us in building new bases for us to go ahead. For the university to fulfill its role as a social actor in this delicate historical moment, and to continue producing research connected to education and society.

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1 The CentroSP project was conducted by researchers from Nomads.usp as part of the 11th. Sao Paulo International Architecture Biennial, from October to December 2017. This collective project contributed to four doctoral research works then underway in the Postgraduate Program in Architecture and Urbanism at IAU-USP and developed at Nomads.usp, including the work "Sound and the city: listening to frontiers in public spaces", by Luciana Santos Roça, funded by FAPESP, the Sao Paulo Agency for Research Support.

2 From the original in French: "L'architecture n'organise en effet pas seulement des espaces, elle construit des environnements spécifiques, elle définit des « ambiances ». Ce trait, fondateur du bâti mais souvent oublié dans les doctrines architecturales, devient aussi de plus en plus prégnant du fait de l'évolution des techniques dans la construction et de la production d'effets sensibles auxquels nous nous familiarisons jour après jour".