Soundscape, Landscape, Escape

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> To hold, for example, that natural space, the space described by the geographer, existed as such and was then as some point socialized leads to the ideological posture of nostalgic regret for a space that is no longer, or else to the equally ideological view that this space is of no consequence because it is disappearing.
> (Lefebvre 1991, 190)

1. Introduction

Soundscape: no concept has proven to be more fertile or ubiquitous in the academic study of sound. The term is everywhere in sound studies, and seems somehow central to everything. For people new to the field, it provides an exciting point of entry. It also graces the covers of some of our important books. As a neologism it is immediately accessible. It sounds like what it means, even if the term lays like a blanket over a field of competing meanings.

> The term's popularity rests precisely on its ability to evoke a whole complex set of ideas, preferences, practices, scientific properties, legal frameworks, social orders, and sound that the emerging field of sound studies is – and in truth – having a difficult time getting its collective minds around.[1]

1 Kelman 2010, 228.

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The word *soundscape* speaks to the physicality of sonic space; it simultaneously conveys a sense of being expansive *and* contained. Like *landscape*, it suggests spaces and people, and at once implies a point of audition and omniscience. For R. Murray Schafer, a soundscape is a sonic environment, »any acoustic field of study«[2], from physical spaces to recordings. In practice, he used *soundscape* as a total social concept to describe the field of sounds (and possibilities for sound) in a particular place, or an entire culture, »a total appreciation of the sonic environment«.[3] As Mitch Akiyama has pointed out, many of Schafer's terms exposed and inverted visual biases in the description of space:

> Landmarks become ›soundmarks‹, clairvoyance becomes ›clairaudience‹, and eyewitnesses were recast as ›earwitnesses‹. […] Schafer's neologisms alert us to the invisibility and banality of visual metaphors by reimagining language as implicitly aural.[4]

Other writers have taken up the term *soundscape* to mean many different things. Emily Thompson follows Alain Corbin in thinking more analogically, where a soundscape is

> an auditory or aural landscape. Like a landscape, a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and culture constructed to make sense of that world.[5]

David W. Samuels, Louise Meintjes, Ana Maria Ochoa and Thomas Porcello consider it a useful concept because it objectifies sound for scholarly analysis. For them *soundscape*

> provides some response to the ephemerality dilemma by offering a means to materialize sounds, their interrelations, and their circulation.[6]

Outside more restricted academic definitions, the term is everywhere:

> It regularly appears in the titles of books, chapters, and articles, in the names of CDs, in the monikers of performance ensembles, in pieces by sound artists,

2 Schafer 1994, 8.

3 Ibid., 4.

4 Akiyama 2010, 56.

5 Thompson 2002, 1.

6 Samuels et al. 2010, 1.

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depictions of field recordings and field recording techniques, in the vocabulary of sound design for theaters, museums or amusement parks, and even in descriptions of the work of companies that specialize in home theater installation.[7]

The term has expanded from noun to modifier and even verb: *soundscape recording* and *soundscape art* have emerged both from practices of field recording more broadly and the World Soundscape Project in particular. More recently, in a wonderful essay on Bose noise-cancelling headphones, Mack Hagood (2011) has used the term *soundscaping* to describe the process through which people shape their own sonic environments by using noise-cancelling headphones to cancel out ambient sound and substitute their own music or content, thereby asserting the privacy of their sonic space through an act of consumption. In a way, Hagood is the Yang to Schafer's Yin. Hagood presupposes the implication of scholars in modern, cosmopolitan life: they are as implicated in the desires behind noise-cancelling headphones as anyone else, carving out little, privatized spaces of quietude to keep social difference at bay and provide a space of self-constitution. His analysis is grounded in the politics of social difference around gender, race and class. *Soundscaping* is a lot of *landscaping*. For Schafer, on the other hand, *soundscape* is meant to invoke nature, and the limits and outsides of industrial society. Even as it reaches into the modern world to describe its ambiance, Schafer's *soundscape* carries with it a fairly strict – if sophisticated – antimodernist politics. For him, the concept is meant to light a way out of consumer culture. In both cases, *soundscape* is an attempt to deal with the problem of representing sonic space.

The essays in the present collection also foreground the problem of representing space. They take up the question of historical soundscapes to consider techniques of sonic-spatial representation in fiction and documentary text, film and radio. In this short meditation, I step back to consider academic traditions of representing sonic space, first in a very schematic history of the word *soundscape*, and reading it from the perspective of the so-called »spatial turn« in the humanities and social sciences.[8] In particular, I want to push beyond the widely-understood notion that soundscape is both a physical space and its representation. Rather, to follow Henri Lefebvre, I want to argue that the soundscape construct[9] simultaneously indexes a set of sonic-spatial practices, the

7 Kelman 2010, 214.

8 Gregory 1994; Warf / Arias 2009.

9 I use *construct* rather than *concept* to note that soundscape theory also has relations to particular cultural practices, and to highlight that there is no single, coherent conception of soundscape agreed upon by scholars or practitioners. Rather, like *life* to biologists, it is an intensely productive and polymorphous idea.

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metadiscourses that describe them, and the cultural and sensory conditions that make it possible to – even passively – experience sonic space in certain terms.[10] Concepts of *soundscape* are artifacts of a set of professional discourses that conceive of sonic space (in this case, sound studies and acoustic ecology), but they link up with ways of perceiving and living space. In doing so, the soundscape construct moves a bit closer to the »dominant space« of our societies than we might first imagine.[11] Placed in its intellectual-historical milieu, *soundscape* is an artefact of a set of dominant ways of organizing sonic space.

2. Origins in Music and Sound Design

As a concept, *soundscape* is artefactual, which is to say it comes out of a particular cultural moment and location. In the absence of a fuller intellectual history of the term, we can turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines *soundscape* as a »musical composition consisting of a texture of sounds« or »the sounds which form an auditory environment«. The two senses are related, and we are familiar with the latter usage derived directly from R. Murray Schafer's work, but the former sense also has a relationship to sound that is tied to place. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites an unsigned 1968 *Time Magazine* review of Debussy's *Images pour Orchestre – Gigues, Iberia, Rondes de Printemps* as performed by l'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande and conducted by Ataulfo Argenta. The reviewer writes of Argenta:

> in this collection, he proved his mastery of the subtle colors, treacherous rhythms, and delicate contrapuntal lines that fashioned Debussy's impressionistic soundscapes.[12]

The music here is particularly poignant: the first two parts of Debussy's composition were meant to evoke his memories of England and Iberia. As a composition, at least in its conception, Debussy's triptych resonates with soundscape recordings that would be produced by acoustic ecologists in the 1970s, which also sought to document time and

10 Lefebvre 1991, 38-39.

11 Ibid., 39.

12 Anonymous review *Time Magazine* 1968, 2, cited in the »soundscape« entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary.*

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place through sound. R. Murray Schafer's earliest published uses of the term *soundscape* follow this meaning. He uses the term to argue that music is not just a temporal art, but a spatial one as well: »Every piece of music is an elaborate soundscape which could be plotted in three-dimensional space«.[13]

If Debussy's musical impressionism is one origin point for our contemporary notion of soundscape, the October 4th, 1968 issue of *Time* (I have in hand the Canadian edition) gives us another. Nestled amidst stories about the U.S. presidential election, the war in Vietnam, the Black Panthers, Quebec politics, the Russian space program, and plenty of car and airline ads, one finds ads for the »Accutron: a watch that doesn't tick«, »fully transistorized« two-way radios, CBC radio's *The Sound of Sports*, the Mini-Memo portable cassette recorder, and the UNIVAC computer (»is saving a lot of people a lot of time«). Issues from other nearby weeks promote hi-fi stereo equipment. As a concept, soundscape is a creature of an orchestrated, technologized, managed sonic world.

This use of the term *soundscape* is tied to another early use of the word in radio drama. Google Books cites a 1958 issue of the BBC magazine *The Listener* which uses soundscape in a discussion of the *mise en scene* of the radio script for *The Prince of Homburg*:

> Michael Bakewell, who produced this play, was jointly responsible for the broadcast of Schiller's ›Death of Wallerstein‹ three years ago. Kleist's drama is in that tradition and Mr. Bakewell was always in command of it. His soundscape of the field of Fehrbell in presented a tremendous panorama to the mind's eye. *The Prince of Homburg* was a fine example of what the Third Programme can and should do for substantial plays that are almost unknown and underperformed in this country.[14]

Three years later, in *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, Hugh Kenner used *soundscape* to describe the BBC's production and use of special effects in *All That Fall*, a Beckett play:

> Pulsating in acoustic space, the soundscape asserts a provisional reality, at every instant richly springing forth and dying.[15]

13 Schafer 1967, 13.

14 Walker, 1958, 475.

15 Kenner 1962, 171.

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3. The Emergence of Soundscape as a Total Social Concept

Carlotta Darò notes two other explicit conceptualizations of *soundscape* that predate Schafer's.[16] The first is a Buckminster Fuller essay from 1966 in the *Music Educators' Journal*. Fuller borrows C.H. Waddington's concept of »epigenetic landscape« to describe the ways in which human and natural environments are co-constructed and mutually implicated.

> When, in due course, man invented words and music he altered the soundscape and the soundscape altered man. The epigenetic evolution interacting progressively between humanity and his soundscape has been profound.[17]

Fuller's use is, so far, the earliest I've found that casts *soundscape* as a total concept, analogous to a biologist's construction of *landscape*, and meant to denote the entire sonic field of humankind as it exists in dynamic relationship with nature.
In an interview with Darò, Schafer credited the soundscape concept to a series of lectures and essays by geographer Michael Southworth.[18] Reading Southworth's 1969 essay, »The Sonic Environment of Cities«, one encounters many of Schafer's core concepts and arguments in slightly different form. The essay is built around »a field study on perception of the Boston soundscape«.[19] For Southworth, noise is the main obstacle to sonic design in cities.[20] He argues that high contrast between foreground and background sounds makes sonic spaces more identifiable; and that open space and responsive spaces hold special potential for experimentation and staging sonic events. Finally, he points to sonic signs (what Schafer would call *soundmarks)* as a key to distinctive sonic experiences of the city.[21] He concludes:

> these steps toward the sonic city would not only enhance city life by helping to overcome the stress and anonymity of today's visual city, but would be one meas-

16 Darò 2012, 185.

17 Fuller 1966, 52.

18 Darò 2012, 185.

19 Southworth 1969, 49. Southworth's »field study« is remarkable for its use of disability, a topic I will consider at length elsewhere.

20 Ibid., 49, 67.

21 Ibid., 67-69.

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> ure for developing the sensory awareness of city residents and would provide an environment more responsive to human action and purpose.[22]

Stefan Helmreich (2011) has argued that the very idea of *soundscape* – in the Schaferian sense of »an auditory environment« owes a debt to the »stereophonic space of recorded sound«, and one can find it in the conceptual field in which *soundscape* originally operated. In *soundscape* there is a bit of a phenomenological contradiction: while the concept is designed to get people to appreciate the sounds of both natural and built environments, to confront the world *as it is*, the concept demands that the listener relate to the world as if it is a recording or composition – in short, as a *work* – but a work that is also its own means of conveyance.
Through the terms »hi-fi« and »lo-fi« Schafer explicitly conceptualizes the soundscape as a system for sound reproduction and transmission:

> A hi-fi system is one possessing a favorable signal-to-noise ratio. The hi-fi soundscape is one in which discrete sounds can be heard clearly because of the low ambient noise level.[23]

After a series of country-city and night-day comparisons, Schafer writes that

> in a lo-fi soundscape individual acoustic signals are obscured in an overdense population of sounds. The pellucid sound – a footstep in the snow, a church bell across the valley or an animal scurrying in the brush – is masked by broad-band noise. Perspective is lost. On a downtown street corner of the modern city there is no distance; there is only presence. There is cross-talk on all the channels, and in order for the most ordinary sounds to be heard they have to be increasingly amplified.[24]

Following Sophie Arkette, Ari Y. Kelman has suggested this aesthetic is tied to an «urban prejudice» in Schafer, a fundamental hostility to the way cities sound.[25] This is not necessarily the case, since Southworth's critique of urban noise is not based in an anti-urban bias. While Southworth presupposes the modern city (even has he critiques it), Schafer

22 Ibid., 70.
23 Schafer 1994, 43.
24 Ibid.
25 Kelman 2010, 217; Arkette 2004.

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connects his sense of urban alienation with a preference for smaller social groupings, as when he argues that the human voice is the ideal »module for acoustic design«.[26] Hi-fi and low-fi also invoke a way of listening that had come into vogue as Schafer's ideas first came together, and the terms suggest another important branch in a critical genealogy of *soundscape*. As Keir Keightley and Tim Anderson have argued, hi-fi systems – and the ideas attending them – have their own place in the post-war cultural complex. Writing of the specifically American scene, they describe the ideals of hi-fi as intimately connected both with the escapist affects of middle class masculine domesticity, and in a critique of mass culture.

> The conception of home audio as a masculine technology that permits a virtual escape from domestic space is a significant development in the history of sound recording. Before World War II, the phonograph and recorded music were not especially associated with men. By the 1960s, however home audio sound reproduction equipment had hardened into masculinist technologies *par excellence*.[27]

Periodicals of the time trumpeted the hi-fi boom as a rejection of the mass, feminized tastes embodied by television; in these articles,

> high fidelity is cast as high, masculine, individualistic art, and television is portrayed as low, feminine, mass entertainment.[28]

Magazines and advertisements presented hi-fi as cultivated, sophisticated and edifying. A hi-fi system was said to promise access to the extremes of experience and an escape from the world of middlebrow taste and the levelling effects of mass culture. It offered opportunities for immersion and transcendence through contemplative listening. Although the hi-fi would eventually be superseded by the stereo system, the same logics of gender, domesticity and escape operated within the widespread commercial discourses accompanying stereo equipment.[29] And although Schafer's politics are clearly both anti-modernist and anti-consumerist, he makes use of the same language of escape. The very definition of the hi-fi soundscape borrows its morphology from the aesthetics of the hi-fi record and hi-fi system in the bourgeois living room.

26 Schafer 1994, 215-16; see also Sterne 2003, 242.

27 Keightley 1996, 150; Anderson 2006.

28 Keightley 1996, 156.

29 Anderson 2006.

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Eric Barry locates early spectacles of high fidelity sound reproduction in the longer history of the American technological sublime (see Marx 2000 for the classic discussion of this phenomenon). Like railroads and electric lights, hi-fi audio systems became »objects of aesthetic pleasure and symbols of American identity«.[30] Although Schafer is Canadian, this same logic of technological sublimity in pastoral space guides the move to soundscape recording. Despite somewhat different political motivations, early World Soundscape Project recordings took up on the rhetoric already present in recordings like Emory Cook's *Rail Dynamics* (ca. 1951), which was meant to document both locomotives that were going out of use, and the spectacle of hi-fi sound reproduction. Thus, hi-fi culture informed both the theory and practice of work in acoustic ecology, at least in its earliest formal statements and documents.

Schafer also directly links *soundscape* to avant-garde trends in twentieth-century composition and the practices of music appreciation most often connected with Western art music. He writes:

> the opening out of the space-time containers we call compositions and concert halls to allow the introduction of a whole new world of sounds outside them.

From John Cage's *4'33"* to Pierre Schafer's *musique concrete* to electronic and tape music, Schafer finds inspiration from the canon of 20th-century experimental composers.[31] Further, we should

> regard the soundscape of the world as a huge musical composition, unfolding around us ceaselessly. We are simultaneously its performers, its audience, its composers. […] Only a total appreciation of the acoustic environment can give us the resources for improving the orchestration of the soundscape.[32]

30 Barry 2010, 116.

31 Schafer 1994, 5.

32 Ibid., 205-06. Schafer is ambivalent on the position of the composer. Although he clearly identifies with it in his writings and musical work, he is also aware of the position's limitations, noting that acoustic design should »never become design control from above«, and that acoustic designers must understand »acoustics, psychology, sociology, music and a great deal more besides« – a demand that still too often goes unfulfilled in real world practices of acoustic design.

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While Schafer's desire to exceed the »spatial frame« of the concert hall might be echoed by a critic of the western tradition like Christopher Small[33], Schafer retains an essentially heroic model of the composer, »separate from both performer on the one hand and audience from the other«[34], dressed now in the clothes of the acoustic designer. Sounds are

> the natural raw material of the art, are thought of as mere recalcitrant matter, to be put in order by the force of will and intelligence.[35]

In this way, Schafer follows from the Cagean tradition. As Cage wrote in 1937,

> The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as music.[36]

4. Conclusion

The sociogenesis of *soundscape* is typical of twentieth-century sonic concepts. Everything psychoacoustics claims to know about hearing in the state of nature was the result of interactions between ears and telephones.[37] So too, *soundscape* was shaped by a relationship to recording, reproduction and western art music concert tradition. The desire for aesthetic of purity that animates Schafer's cultural criticism seems entirely of a piece with talk of high fidelity and stereophonic reproduction of concert music in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the cultures surrounding institutionalized art music at the time. *Soundscape* implies a way of listening to compositions – a rapt, total attention

33 Small 1977, 25. This desire to escape the frame may well have met an equal, opposite force in Schafer's conception of soundscape recording as putting a frame around sounds (Akiyama 2010, 57). In turn this opens out into the spatial implications of the enframing function of sound technologies more generally (Heidegger 1977; Sofia 2000; Sterne 2012).

34 Schafer 1994, 29.

35 Ibid., 30. This stands in contrast to Barry Truax's more interactional model, where »the individual listener in a soundscape is not engaged in a passive type of energy reception but rather is part of a dynamic system of information exchange« (Truax 1984, 11).

36 Reprinted in Cage 1961, 3.

37 Sterne 2012.

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– and a sense of the world that is much like a compositional work. A soundscape is a totality, whether we consider that totality something small, like a recording, or something huge, like the entire sonic airspace of a town, country or culture.

Of course, nobody has to accept Schafer's definitions or ways of thinking about soundscape. Looking around today, we have precisely the opposite situation: the term seems to have almost infinite plasticity, and indeed many writers reject some part of Schafer's terminology or politics, but still find the term incredibly useful. The term is everywhere capable of being mobilized to support a host of positions regarding sonic culture. The term's almost instinctive appeal – to academic writers, journalists, acoustic ecologists, architects, composers, musicians, music critics, software designers, students and many others – has more than a little connection to the habitus that subtends the hi-fi systems and concert halls that Schafer explicitly invokes in his work. In its stretch toward totality, the term reaches out toward omniscience, but like all proposals for transcendence, it can at best offer a situated transcendence.

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