

Listening to traffic with guts and antennae

Andra McCartney, Concordia University

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After soundwalks, there is always talk about traffic. Other topics come and go, but this one seems ubiquitous, like the sound in our daily lives. The quality of attention invoked in soundwalks encourages heightened listening to and reflection on the vibrations and flows of road traffic, the most constant sounds of many places. Roads and their margins are ecotones, overlapping ecosystems, landscapes of tension where intersecting habitats of plants, pets and free dogs, cars, bikes and motorbikes, trucks, pedestrians, beasts of burden and streetcars are ordered by laneways, held and released by traffic signals, covered with dust, gravel, tarmac; and suffused with the whines, roars and tickings of passing vehicles, as well as their spectacle, smells and toxic emissions. How do resonant bodies sense vibrations of traffic and make sense of them? What kinds of prostheses and practices are used to do this, and how do these technological processes affect daily sonic experiences of traffic, urban design that pays attention to sound, and the creation and reception of sonic artworks involving traffic?

During the activities of the Soundwalking Interactions project, traffic flows become points of articulation, discussion, and reflection. Soundwalkers *become* traffic in a different way from in everyday life, walking and listening intently as a restless, shape-shifting group whose flocking bodies shape the sensations, texture and pacing of movements through the space, inflecting each others' sonic experience so that each soundwalk is different, hearing the punctuations of each others' footwear, brushings of winter clothes, jangle of keys in pockets and chimes of unruly cellphones, matching the pace of the slowest member, following the leader, or fanning out, splitting into smaller cells, flowing together again.

Soundwalkers in different groupings and formations are also part of the larger traffic flows around them. Some listeners struggle with the sounds of traffic, and suffer from its omnipresence in daily life, especially those who can never escape its drone, those who live in the acoustic shadows of highways, autoroutes, and major intersections. One youtube listener responded to a soundwalk recording and engaged in sustained conversation about living near the Decarie expressway in Montreal, his attempts to live with the traffic whose sounds filled his apartment, and marked the routines of daily life. Whatever abstract notions we might pursue in relation to traffic, this listener's concern, like many, is how to live with intense sound in his daily living space. Traffic noise despite its ubiquity is under-noticed in discourse about noise mitigation, because much of its power and volume is in the

infrasonic, or low-frequency range that does not register on the dBA meter that is always and unquestioningly used for noise measurement regulation (Garon-Sayegh 2011, St. Pierre and Maguire 2004). Ideas about listening have been persistently linked to the ear and to sounds that can be pinpointed for legal responsibility, with scant attention paid in noise measurement until recently about how bodies listen with their guts, and what are the effects on bodies of sounds that are more felt than heard. But the type of sound also matters in this discourse, beyond frequency and amplitude. My recent online searches on infrasonic sound level measurement resulted in far more sites about windmills than about road traffic. This is more than a politics of frequency or of loudness.

The conversation with the youtube listener also exceeded questions of frequency or amplitude. He spoke of what he heard in the traffic: diurnal, seasonal and weather changes. He also spoke of how the sound penetrated his apartment, suffusing the living space, especially in the summer with windows open. He found the Balance-Unbalance soundwalk recording had a calming traffic sound, like rushing water. This youtube listener later developed a meditation practice that hinged on mentally transforming traffic into rushing water, to make living with the traffic feel more natural (and inevitable, since the listener refers to nature as something that cannot be changed). Another soundwalker and sound artist, Victoria Fenner, says that she

incorporates traffic into a meditational practice directly, while walking, by breathing along with particular vehicles as they pass her.

Some listeners are at first bored and frustrated by traffic sound and then search for texture, form and meaning. A remarkable instance of mobile listening is related by composer James Tenney, experienced repetitively through the daily grind of driving the Holland Tunnel to get to the Bell labs in New Jersey in the early 1960s, when he was beginning his computer music work there:

One day I found myself listening to these sounds, instead of trying to ignore them as usual.... the sounds of the traffic became so interesting that the trip was no longer a thing to be dreaded and gotten through as quickly as possible. From then on, I actually looked forward to it as a source of new perceptual insights. Gradually, I learned to hear these sounds more acutely, to follow the evolution of single elements within the total sonorous 'mass', to feel, kinesthetically, the characteristic rhythmic articulations of the various elements in combination, etc. Then I began to try to analyze the sounds, aurally, to estimate what their physical properties might be -- drawing upon what I already knew of acoustics and the correlation of the physical and the subjective attributes of sound. (Tenney in Polansky 1984, 154-5).

Tenney also notes the similarity of traffic sounds to ocean surf, echoing the ideas of the youtube listener. But Tenney wanted to avoid the periodic nature of ocean sounds and his resultant Analog #1, Noise Study, is aperiodic. He does say he

believes there are some elements of ocean wave sound in this piece, but does not articulate what these are.

Katherine Kline, psychoanalyst, noise musician and scholar, thinks through the filter of psychoanalysis in her discussion of a soundwalk for the Soundwalking Interactions blog. Hearing “ the far-away traffic hush” she speaks of psychic processes of enclosure and containment:

Here, the thought occurs to me that in a city, we are encircled by this sound, enmeshed in it, and in a sense *contained* by it. The perimeter of the city, overpasses and highways, form a sonic envelope of rubber on asphalt/moisture, a hushing, rising and fading shhh. This dull, sedating rhythm did some mysterious work on me.

<https://soundcloud.com/katherinekline/feb-12-2013-soundwalk-montreal>

As a child I used to follow my mother around the house while she cleaned. I had a particular attachment to her vacuum cleaner, a source of warmth and noise. Wherever she might be vacuuming, I would lay my blanket down beside the machine and slip into its envelope. My mom and that machine and I were intermingled in a noisy aesthetic that connected us for a moment. Onto the next room she would go, and I would follow. My mother’s machine not only cleaned the carpets, it held me through its mollifying sound.

We are held, as the psychoanalysts tell us, born helpless, gestating in an environment of objects, entities, capacities. We find ourselves wide-open, open-eared in this place... this sonorous bath points us precisely to a lack of closure, the opening-out of reception. Something is resounding within, as we’re sounding-out. Our sonic envelopes have a way of expressing themselves through us. (Kline 2013)

So there are a number of different affective responses to traffic that drive these approaches and analyses, from frustration and irritation to boredom to curiosity to comfort, calm and sedation. My intention in making the Spectral Traffic piece that can be heard on the Listening Station at this symposium and on the andrasound youtube channel, was to bring together sonic sources related to these affective responses: I integrated short samples of sound works by James Tenney, Victoria Fenner and Katherine Kline based on their traffic experiences, with different traffic recordings from soundwalks that I have done in the last few years through the Soundwalking Interactions project. I wanted to brush through the frequency spectrum, bringing attention to the infrasonic rumblings that mark emissions of multiple diesel and gasoline engines, and the flights of tires, sirens, bells and horns across the sound field. I wanted to juxtapose this with the joyful human environment of a bicycle race, recorded in the same location as the car traffic recordings, at a different time. Finally, I wanted to explore the fantastic imaginary space of slowed experience, created by dwelling in and slowing the speed of the bicycle bell sound. When I put a copy of the piece online, almost right away I got a comment about how soothing the traffic sounded to one listener, and how the human sounds seemed to interrupt this soothing. Perhaps the way I sweep through the spectrum, the fluidity of mix from one sound to another that makes the traffic interesting for me to listen to and interact with as a performer, creates soothing

gestures, stroking the sound into the listener's ear rather than startling them, making sounds that are periodic, feeling like breathing or ocean waves in their coming and going, rather than the aperiodic and less obviously rhythmic noise of dense road traffic: more like sparse traffic on a country road, with more obvious phrasing.

Perhaps the soothing, lulling quality of traffic sound in this work and others is partly because of the sonorous envelope that the sound creates through its constancy, as Kline suggests. Like her mum's vacuum cleaner, or the raver's woofer speakers, the broad noise band of traffic heard at a safe distance -- and here perspective becomes very important -- becomes a continuous, soothing blanket that softens contact with the surrounding world, belying its origin in an ecotone, a landscape of tension; belying the terrifying howl and thump of air when a truck passes close; belying the release of toxic emissions into the atmosphere; resonating; feeling like home.

This feeling of containment and comfort can come from physical distance from distant traffic, from mental distance during a soundwalk or composing process as one begins to reflect on and consider the sounds and how they interact, from aesthetic distance as traffic is framed and sweetened in various ways during processing of sound. A soundwalk frames traffic in time through a shared activity.

A piece made from traffic sound, whether in situ or heard elsewhere, frames the traffic and sweetens it through processing, filtering, harmonizing and making it rhythmically interesting, further musicking the sound, aestheticizing it. Repeatedly in writing about urban traffic sound art projects, ideas of comfort and soothing emerge, of “cushioning the blow” as Noah Vawter describes it (Vawter, 2006, 16), of softening urban noise as the director of the Mass MOCA gallery writes in response to an artwork by Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger (Thompson in O and A, 2009, 65). Artists working in situ, such as Odland and Auinger, or Canadians Gayle Young and Reinhard Reitzenstein, use tubing to filter and harmonize the traffic sound; in another work by Odland and Auinger, listeners can sit on speakers to feel sound through their bodies more clearly; mobile audio such as that by Noah Vawter (2006) or Samuel Thulin (http://www.agencetopo.qc.ca/detours/cityditties_en.html), plays with traffic sound rhythmically, in a similar way to the car alarm dances that were witnessed at the symposium in the videos that Brandon LaBelle showed. The hope of these works may be to make listeners more aware of ubiquitous traffic sound and the emissions that it signals, as well as to make the sites of dense traffic more pleasurable. Does pleasure and comfort lead to awareness? Or does it simply make traffic more acceptable? Are assumptions being made about the affective responses that will be produced in the listener? The listener response to my piece indicates that feeling soothed by traffic sound could lead to thinking of human environments as an interruption, certainly not what I

intended, or heard myself in the sound. This points to the great importance of checking in with listeners to understand more of *how* they resonate with pieces made from traffic sound, how the different affects of comfort, soothing, boredom, curiosity, irritation, frustration, might lead to different relationships to traffic and its effects.

Sources

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