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Representations and sonic
landscapes of the culturally
heterogenous city

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Hearing diversity: representations and sonic landscapes of the culturally heterogenous city

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I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me.

(Juhani Pallasmaa)

The ear is an undoubtedly selfish organ; it only takes, and gives nothing in return... and precisely because it simply takes, it is also condemned to take in everything that comes within its proximity.

(Georg Simmel)

Sound accompanies people – it is present when identities are formed, it stretches along landscapes and it fills places with meaning. Sounds can give almost anything a purpose, certain character and position. Sounds interconnect with spaces and places. Place is not only felt in the visual context, but it resounds as well. Sound can be seen as a moving feature that is intangible and naturally connects to places, but as we know, sound gains many other meanings as well. Sound can be controlled, banned and discriminated; it can be promoted, enjoyable and celebrated.

This paper focuses on the role of sounds and voices in establishing the identities of people and of places. It explores the representation of difference and otherness in Australia. It is concerned with the relationship between sounds and places and it focuses on the urban sound. The paper begins, however, at the other end of the string, addressing the Australian stillness and the fascination with the silence of the Australian landscape. It explores the connection between the “silent country” and colonial imaginings, examining the position of the first settlers in acquiring the idea of the speechless, rough and mysterious landscape. In the second part, the paper moves to the urban space and it addresses the importance of its sound and noise. It focuses on the sounds of Footscray, especially of the Footscray market. It explores the dynamic paths of migration and diversity that change the urban space and the “sensory move” in studying cultural diversity and multicultural communication.

Silence of the Australian landscape

Australia is a silent continent. The dryness of the country, stillness of its sand dunes, silence of the bush and the tranquillity of local Aborigines make Australia a land of soundless beauty. Here, it is not difficult to place, as Michael Catchart (1998, 2000, p. 96) argues, “not Aborigines, but silence on the far side of the frontier.” The oppressed are often not only invisible, but silent as well, and it is interesting to consider silence as something pure and innocent being produced through demoralized bodies, which those who oppress perceive as impure, immoral or dirty. It is as if those in power are *speaking* silence through the bodies of those who are subordinate to them.

Whilst reading some of the colonial writing the clear and strong connectivity of the body, sound and soul comes to one's mind. This mysterious relationship between different sensorial experiences of the world can be traced to the present as well. The voice of the human, connected to the landscape, becomes attached to the human body. As Maurice Merleau Ponty (1962) said, it is the flesh that sees, not the soul as it was believed before, by Descartes for example. The body and the voice become one, it is not possible to separate them, because as Hill (2003, p. 42) notes, "they are by nature centrally, organically ingested and enacted." The inheritance of this view is perhaps the one that is so problematic to look at. The question of the relationship between voice and body, as well as image or representation of this body is rather complex.

If we think about this connection from within, we could say that sight and sound often do not seem to complement each other harmoniously. As Slavoj Žižek (1996, p. 92) says, "The moment we enter the symbolic order, an unbridgeable gap separates forever a human body from its voice. The voice acquires a spectral autonomy; it never quite belongs to the body we see, so that even when we see a living person talking, there is always some degree of ventriloquism at work: it is as if the speaker's own voice hollows him out and in a sense speaks by itself, through him." It is the position of the object, which is destined to be left mute, 'stuck in the throat'. The object is here as long as the sound remains unarticulated; the moment it resounds, the moment it is 'spilled out', the object is evacuated. In this way we could say that the oneness of the human body and its voice can only exist until the human remains silent.

We may argue that the Silence of Australia was instigated at the time of the colonisation of this land. It is important though that this silence was also broken soon after that. But who was it broken by? I think it was not broken by the first colonial ships leaning against the rugged coastline, or by the clinking of metal chains and the mechanical sounds of the rifles but by the shovels and picks of those who came afterwards - migrants, working in the cane fields of the far North Queensland, or in the forests of the Snowy Mountains, or women trying to make their voices heard among the loudness of production lines in the growing city's industry. The British first settlers have located themselves somewhere in the middle, between the mystical silent existence of the Aborigines whose voices remained 'stuck somewhere in their throats' and the rough loud sounds of the lower working class, dominated by later migrants. The *elite* acted as a kind of translator that would not actually do its job, but would just simply guard its position - as someone who speaks, but is aware of the importance of being quiet at the same time.

It is important to have some of this fascination with silence in mind before talking about the sound vibrancy of the urban environment. Silence in Australia seems to be an important part of the national imaginary and a value that belongs to the landscape, but it nevertheless has its owner and its creator. This position often seems to be occupied by the first white settlers. Even if the silence belongs to the weaker and unprotected, it is never in the domain of this weaker and unprotected.

Silence, however, cannot exist without sounds. Silence, if created, needs its counterpart. We could say that silence even cannot be created and cannot exist without loudness to pave its way in the first place. Remaining loud and acquiring

silence at the same time announces the strength of an individual. The ability to be loud and remain loud proclaims someone's presence and power. The right to speak for yourself derives from the capacity to be loud.

There are some places that seem to adopt this capacity to be, and to remain, loud. These are the places which are 'owned', in some symbolic sense, by the locals, where there is a connection between these places and the people populating them. Contemporary urban research is full of exploration of places and spaces. Nevertheless, the relationship between the urban environment and its inhabitants and the interconnectivity of the voices of those inhabiting the streets has often been a neglected area of the urban research. As Fran Tonkiss (2003, p. 297) notes, "Theories of the modern city have frequently figured urban life as isolating, anonymous, degrading of social ties." The city environment has been seen as something that *a priori* separates individuals from each other¹.

Sounds of Footscray

Whenever stepping in front of the doors of Melbourne one may be confronted with the popularity of the image of the multicultural city where people live harmoniously with each other. But, how far does this popular image of harmonious and culturally diverse community actually extend to? To the corners of the new glass and concrete Federation square? Or perhaps to the edge of cosmopolitan Lygon and Brunswick streets? Does it end maybe somewhere near the Coburg oriental shops? Or does it extend perhaps all the way to Footscray? Or even to greater Dandenong? Many social theorists would say that how we understand environment around us depends on how we see the world - multicultural society extends to where we can still see diversity. I would say that the cultural diversity goes further, to where we feel it, see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, feel it in any possible way.

As Jacques Attali (2003, p. 3) in his famous book *Noise* argues, "Our science has always desired to monitor, measure, abstract and castrate meaning, forgetting that life is full of noise and that death alone is silent: work noise, noise of man, and of beast. Noise bought, sold, or prohibited. Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise". Having this Attali's argument in mind, I started with the sensual exploration of some of the city's places in Melbourne, marked by the sounds and loudness, as well as by the migratory experience and by the people who inhabit them. After trying to think about what could serve me as best examples from which I could begin my journey, and from making my way around the city numerous times, exploring all kinds of different places, from bustling coffee shops along Sydney Road to abandoned empty industrial warehouses of Campbellfield to the silent but expressive Keilor cemetery, I stopped and listened to the sound of Footscray. Finally I found a place that absolutely excited me - the potential microcosm of the contemporary urban environment - I found the good old market place.

Market places always made me feel quite eager and excited. They are also the places which could make me feel absolutely awful and uncomfortable and even extremely sick. In one of the towns in the middle of Europe, where I was born, we also had a market place. It was predominantly a food market, although not a great one. There

¹ Georg Simmel (1997, p. 170, 171) talks for example about the "merciless separation of space" and argues that "a real unity of the diverse does not exist in spatial terms".

were a couple of stalls with locally produced vegetables, a quite outstanding meat section and a very small seafood section. There were also few shaky racks of baggy clothes and some lines of shoes, everything looking quite unfashionable. Then there was a quite impressive collection of plastic things of suspicious origin that always made me wonder of their potential usage. But nevertheless, Saturday's market in my old home town was the busy and lively meeting place. The funny thing that I remember is that there were always also lively and a bit wild Romany kids running around. The kids which somehow disappeared during the week and blended into the crowd of the streets and courtyards came back to the surface every Saturday morning, with strong vocal sounds which announced cheap prices of a variety of things - the most striking probably being small bombs and rockets each year around the Christmas time. These kids stood out partly because of the type of goods they were selling, but they were so noticeable also because of their high pitch voices, melodies that sounded somehow distinct or even distant in those Saturday mornings, like they were coming from the musky courtyards of the weekdays. Their voices somehow invoked the spirit of the everyday, the only thing different was that they were much more emphasised in the market place - they somehow brought this feeling of "togetherness - in - difference" (Ang 2000), to use a Len Ang's term, back to life.

Footscray market in a way reminds me on my old home town market place. There are no such dangerous goods as bombs and rockets selling in Melbourne, not even in Footscray, and the colourfulness is much greater in the Footscray corridors, but there are these marginal, in a way strange and different pitch voices around - and they are very vocal and loud - they come to the surface with a kind of intensity that is never possible to catch on the streets during the week. They are not very distant, I would say, but they do express the difference. "C'mon, have a look, have a look, only 4.50 dollars, have a look," sings the dark haired guy with a big belly and a colourful apron behind the chunks of the chicken meat. "Specials today, have a look here," answers the older, grey haired man from the other side of the corridor. "Five, five, five," poetically join their voices a lady and a man leaning over the box of crabs. "How many there? Only one?" Surprisingly ask someone at the pyramid rock of vegetables. A kid shouts for his mother, a woman is looking for her daughter, a man in front of me suspiciously turns back and eagerly asks me: "why are you following me, leave me alone!" Voices are loud and they fill the place they inhabit. They are interesting, diverse, maybe irritating and frustrating at times, but most importantly, they cannot be carried away. They somehow claim their right to the territory they inhabit. "Especially within the context of the urban environment," Arkette argues, "sound is never a neutral phenomenon. Each sound is imbued with its own lexical code: sound as sign, symbol, index; as ostensibly defining a personal territory" (2004, p. 160).

Sound connects to the place and places can often be identified by different sounds that inhabit them. We should emphasise though, that there are not only sounds that shape our experience of the places. Different senses produce also different takes on the same space. Henri Lefebvre (1991, pp. 199-200) argued for an acknowledgment of the centrality of aural space, asserting that the Cartesian focus on visual representations of space "forgets that space does not consist in the projection of an intellectual representation, does not arise from the visible-readable realm, but that it is first of all *heard* (listened to) and *enacted* (through physical gestures and movements)". Moreover, "Space is listened for, in fact, as much as seen, and heard

before it comes into view". Walter Benjamin speaks about "fragments of the past". Now what is a fragment of the past? Is it a piece of text? An image? Language and its rhythm? Or a remembered melody? Specific taste? Sweet smell? I think, all of these. Everything, even an image or a textual fragment, has a sensory component.

Let's return to Footscray for a moment at this point. Footscray is a synonym for difference. It displays differences on almost every corner. However, it is a *different difference* in Footscray in comparison to some other Melbourne suburbs. What do I mean by that? Footscray has a large population of Asian origin and a tradition of migrant settlement. The two top countries of birth of the population of Footscray, following the figures of the 2001² census, are Viet Nam and China, followed by Italy, United Kingdom and Greece. Over the years, there was a steady decrease in representation of European migrants. New migrants settling in Footscray were mainly arriving from Viet Nam. This contributed to the emphasised "asianisation" (the representation of Asian invasion) of Footscray over the years. The newest migrants from African countries also settled in Footscray in recent years.

The population of Asian and other migrant groups is nothing alien to Melbourne. Visually the differences can be quite remarkable, having in mind the colourfulness of the front windows of street shops, the variety in sizes of different banners on the streets or the vibrant colours of the clothes of people passing by. Nevertheless, the colourfulness and its intensity are present elsewhere in urban Melbourne as well. What makes Footscray streets different though, as I see it, is the presence of squeaky voices, congested tonalities, rough humbles, loud children shouting, metallic sounds of a meat slicer, African hip-hop, American country, Tibetan chants and the classical music down at the train station which is the latest weapon in the fight against crime. The senses are far from innocent: the senses position experiences of spaces as well as locate cultures in these spaces. The senses are political. And this is what I can add to describe the experience of difference in the area of Footscray, especially from the experience of the Footscray market.

Footscray market is the place where the everyday multiculturalism is negotiated through the sounds existing in relation to each other. These relations are often oppositional but are nevertheless able to co-exist without major tensions. While listening to the sounds of Footscray market, the notion of difference and otherness is recreated only from the point of view of the outsider. Looking at it often even fails to differentiate and *otherise*. The sense of otherness in the places like Footscray Market is in many ways inflicted upon the place from the outside - from the point of view of those who forcibly seize the right to possess the multicultural meanings, who think they know what the *true* meaning of multiculturalism is, and then try to impose it on everyone else.

The soundscape of the Footscray market makes me think of what actually constitutes the "Other" of the contemporary city - "Other" that we often need to recognise and define to be able to express ourselves. Visually, there seems to be not much of "otherness" of the contemporary urban environment such as Footscray. Changing of visual urban landscape is somehow more "adaptable" for people inhabiting the city. Changing of the sonic landscape is on the other hand a more complicated process - it entails modifying the whole range of the most inner human conditions like the

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001 Population and Housing

language expressions or values. What constitutes the notion of the “Other” in the contemporary, culturally heterogenous urban environment is in this way not so much about the colour of the skin or facial features as it is about the pitch, the melody, the pulsation of the voice. The otherness is not imbedded only in what the people say, but in how they say it or in how their voices are associated with the objects inhabiting the urban space. Listening to the contemporary city is different from looking at it, in part because, as Les Back (2005, p. 3) notes, race and racism operate within ocular grammars of difference.

The urban environment forces different sounds to co-exists. “Sound cannot be contained within four walls and sonic space does not follow the same rules as physical space” (Arkette 2004, p. 166). Sound is fragmentary in character. As we have seen, it nevertheless has the abilities to attach itself to places. To represent them. To speak the places and to set up a dialogue with those who inhabit the streets. Visual component often seems to lack this last thing. As Arkette (2004, p. 167) proposes, aural space should be offering a model for the kind of fluidity that a whole range of other disciplines aspire to.

The researchers in human sciences should not forget that cities, while offering concrete grounds for our everyday experiences, speak their past and announce their future. In the Australian case, this is an especially interesting field to explore as there are many words which were covered with the blank paper, *de-voiced* in the past. Cities always bubble somewhere underneath their crisp crust. They are lived through the sounds. They are cities of words, whispers, laughter and screams. Cities always invite us to listen. To actually listen.

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