This essay collection and its accompanying CD have emerged from a sense that the field of sound, and our understanding of it, are undergoing a set of changes. The starting point for the idea arose from a Leverhulme Artist-in-Residence Fellowship held by BJ Nilsen in the UCL Urban Laboratory during 2012. Other points of connection include the regular Stadtklang events organized by the Urban Laboratory, and emerging intersections at UCL between architecture, acoustic ecology, and the study of urban soundscapes.

Our critical engagement with sound has been facilitated through the development of interdisciplinary fields such as “acoustic ecology” and “sound studies,” yet the topic is nonetheless extremely difficult to accommodate within existing approaches to the organization of knowledge. The study of sound is marked by a series of intersecting domains derived from history, physics, law, musicology, and many other areas—each bringing its own set of intellectual concerns and institutional entanglements.

The Acoustic City comprises five thematic sections: urban soundscapes with an emphasis on the distinctiveness of the urban acoustic realm; acoustic flânerie and the recording of sonic environments; sound cultures arising from specific associations between music, place, and sound; acoustic ecologies including relationships between architecture, sound, and urban design; and the politics of noise extending to different instances of anxiety or conflict over sound. In putting together this collection, we have also sought to de-centre some of the implicit assumptions underlying earlier approaches to the study of sound by including feminist insights, post-colonial threads, and other approaches that necessitate a more nuanced reflection on the sensory realms of modernity.

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The intersections between sound and vision are perhaps most strikingly represented through the concept of the “soundscape,” which plays on the established notion of an optical field of sensory perception. Yet, the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer’s influential use of the term soundscape, which he elaborated from the late 1960s onwards, belies a tension between the idea of the soundscape as a form of direct sensory experience and a proliferation of artificial, modified, or pre-recorded soundscapes. More nuanced approaches to the categorization of acoustic spaces have emerged since the 1970s, ranging from site-specific dimensions to auditory experience to more complex conceptions of sound dynamics and their effective reproduction. Yet even here, in the burgeoning fields of “acoustic ecology” and “sound studies,” we find tensions between an emphasis on the spatio-temporal complexities of sound as an acoustic phenomenon and the wider social or historical context within which sound is experienced. We are perhaps better served by the historian Alain Corbin’s conception of the “auditory landscape” as a sensory realm that forms part of a geographically defined historical process rather than an inchoate amalgam of sonic traces.

The shift in emphasis from the visual experience of landscape towards other modes of sensory perception does not necessarily involve a critical reworking of the concept of landscape itself, since many of the implicit assumptions concerning the bounded human subject and the “naturalization” of space and time persist. In this respect, Schafer’s approach to the understanding of auditory culture holds parallels with the architect Kevin Lynch’s concerns with spatial legibility and earlier topographic explorations of the soundscape that form part of the cartographic impulse of modernity. The idea of the “natural” soundscape is in any case a cultural construction that downplays the human presence in nature and the extent to which any soundscape is refracted through specific forms of human experience, aesthetic longing, or even technological means of mobility to reach ostensibly purer sonic realms.

Under conditions of sensory deprivation the experience of hearing becomes radically modified. Studies of the effects of blindness, for example, reveal very different experiences of the acoustic environment: we find that a seemingly innocuous space such as a university building can be perceived as a disorientating labyrinth of strange echoes. In a similar vein, radically different sonic environments such as underwater spaces reveal the enhanced significance of reverberations and the limited ability of the human ear to accurately perceive the directionality of sound. The anthropologist Stefan Helmreich’s study of the “deep-sea soundscape” reveals an array of sound sources that can be technologically transduced into a perceptible form. His study of the use of a submersible to explore deep-sea environments emphasizes a cyborgian dimension to the acoustic realm whereby ostensibly silent worlds can be brought within the scope of human hearing. The cyborgian acoustic realm can be extended to include the use of specific devices such as ultrasound recorders to render the inaudible accessible. Beyond the limitations of human hearing, there are a myriad of acoustic worlds ranging from the echolocation calls of bats to the unheard micro-cosmos in soil, water, and other ecological niches. At any one time, we are only tuned into a small fraction of the acoustic realm, even if we can feel the physiological effects of indiscernible frequencies or notice the material traces left by the “acoustic emissions” of weathering processes on the exposed surfaces of the city.

The attempt to reveal hidden or neglected sonic worlds can also be extended to the historical imagination and the use of available sources to reconstruct what the cultural geographer
David Lowenthal refers to as “the audible past.” Early modern European soundscapes were very different to those of the industrial metropolis—dominated by sounds such as blacksmiths, bells, windmills, and human voices. Much of this sound would have been concentrated in higher frequency ranges than contemporary soundscapes, it would have been affected to a greater extent by seasonal rhythms, and it would show strong diurnal variations with a much more restricted acoustic realm during hours of darkness. By the eighteenth century, however, noise was increasingly regarded as a problem, especially in larger towns and cities. In William Hogarth’s engraving entitled The Enraged Musician (1741), we see the agony of a violinist trying to practise by an open window, forced to listen to the maddening tumult of the crowded London street below.

With the spread of industrialization, the impact of noise further intensified. The theatre critic Mel Gordon describes how the working-class districts of industrializing towns and cities in Europe during the 1840s and 1850s were characterized by “a constant din of construction and pounding, of the shrieking of metal sheets being cut and the endless thump of press machinery, of ear-splitting blasts from huge steam whistles, sirens, and electric bells that beckoned and dismissed shifts of first-generation urbanized laborers from their unending and repetitive days.” This acoustically defined disciplinary landscape reinforced both class distinctions and emerging geographies of excessive noise. The surge of sonic disturbance experienced in the expanding nineteenth-century city forms part of the emerging rationale for “zoning” and the rationalization of urban space; a process that gathered further momentum in the twentieth century with the development of technological means to measure noise and impose new forms of standardization.

During the twentieth century, we find growing ambivalence towards urban noise, which is variously characterized as a symbol of progress and prosperity, a disorientating and potentially health threatening source of social disorder, or a fascinating realm of cultural experimentation. Writing in 1946, for example, Aldous Huxley named the twentieth century as “the Age of Noise.” Huxley’s concern with the “pre-fabricated din” enabled by radios, mass advertising, and “a babel of distractions” connects with Theodor Adorno’s criticism of “emotional listening” and the use of music for social control. Changing sensitivities to noise also reflect wider anxieties over the “effects of modernity,” especially in the early decades of the twentieth century with emerging psychoanalytic interest in forms of sensory “over stimulation” as a source of nervous shock. The fraying of distinctions between music and sound during the twentieth century forms part of a wider pattern of acoustic experimentation that would extend to architecture, synesthetic dimensions to the visual arts, and new technological advances in the recording, manipulation, and broadcast of the auditory realm. The auditory dimensions to space, and the struggle to interpret or represent these worlds, became part of a wider set of contentions and developments within the phenomenology of the modern sensory realm.

A flurry of technological innovations for the recording of sound during the 1930s displaced the rudimentary magnetic wire recorders of the past. These new advances in acoustic mimicry, including the introduction of stereo recording and the rise of magnetic audio tape, provided new possibilities for editing and mixing. The commercial availability of tape recorders from the early 1940s onwards also allowed music to be created more easily without conventional notation systems. John Cage, for example, describes how the tape recorder gave composers access to “the entire field of sound,” so that the distinction between musical and non-musical sound became increasingly irrelevant. The introduction of non-pitched sounds into music by Edgard Varèse and Cage, for example, or the direct use of mechanical noise such as airplane propellers in George Antheil’s Ballet Mécanique (1926), illustrate how the redefinition of music formed part of a wider field of modernist sound experimentation.

The spatial aspects of musical experimentation from the 1960s onwards, and the intensified challenge to regularized post-Renaissance musical forms, also institute a new kind of sonic geography. Works such as György Ligeti’s Atmosphères (1961), used to dramatic effect in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), indicate a new fluidity between experimental sound textures and popular culture.

Sound itself can form part of the political dynamics of urban space: in nineteenth-century Brazil, for example, the violent suppression of slave festivities such as capoeira explicitly linked sonic disruption with the fear of crowds and political insurrection. More recently, the cacerolazos phenomenon of public protests through the banging of metal pots in Latin American cities illustrates how fleeting control over sonic space can serve as a symbolic challenge to state authority. The cacerolazos is a spreading phenomenon; a clattering that surges forth, like a strange tide, to produce an acoustic ripple across the surface of the city. Various types of “acoustic torment” have been used as a form of cultural redress. In the case of Kolkata (Calcutta), for example, the political scientist Sudipta Kaviraj describes how the poor make use of possibilities offered by religious festivals to produce “blaring music throughout the night directed precisely at the middle-class houses.” Noise in this context constitutes a type of “currency for repayment” in the face of pervasive poverty and powerlessness. These types of sonic disruption also expose the limits to a particular kind of European understanding of modernity and the socio-spatial constitution of the public sphere.

Noise can be used as a weapon, or as a means to assert control over space. Social conflict over noise appears to be growing, in part driven by the “acoustic gentrification” underway in many inner urban areas and the increasing density of bars and nightclubs. A further critique of contemporary soundscapes concerns the ubiquity of MP3-dominated acoustic environments. The development of an increasingly sophisticated acoustic carapace for individual urbanites, observable since the early development of the Walkman in the
1980s, marks part of a choreography of socio-spatial disengagement.6 The “auditory self” is now immersed in new forms of digital governmentalities that extend to other aspects of the sensory environment. The contemporary city increasingly resonates to a strange chorus of disembodied digital voices that seek to direct human behaviour.7 The generalized low-grade digital reproduction of music generates distinctive kinds of cultural relationships to sound that are further removed from the “acoustic authenticity” of original sources. The pervasive use of music for the marketing of commodities and the ubiquitous crafting of “lifestyle soundtracks” marks just one element in this unfolding dynamic between the acoustic realm and late capital.

In parallel with the growing political salience of silence, there has been an increasing emphasis on the social and cultural significance of silence. In 1969, for example, the International Music Council of UNESCO passed a motion calling for “the right of everyone to silence.” This officially sanctioned emphasis on silence marks a somewhat ironic regulatory echo to the minimalist acoustic experimentation of Cage and other avant-garde artists. In fact, the experience of anything approaching silence is rather rare: following the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud of 2010, for example, the temporary absence of aircraft produced an eerie stillness across the skies of north-west Europe, as the subsersonic aerial soundscapes of the early twenty-first century temporarily receded.

Cultural and political concerns with noise, and especially the synthetic acoustic realm, have frequently been aligned with a broader critique of modernity. On Earth Day 2005, for instance, an area within the temperate rain forest of the Olympic National Park in Washington State called “One Square Inch of Silence” was created in order to “protect and preserve the natural soundscape.” Considered to be “the quietest place in the United States,” the logic behind this project is that by defending one inch of the park from noise, a vast zone of tranquillity can be realized.4 In this instance, the right to silence and the protection of a “natural soundscape” connects with an ecological critique of modernity and the attempt to create an imaginary acoustic landscape. The rejection of noise also resonates with the long-standing anti-urban sentiments and a distrust in technologically mediated environments.

The cultural politics of sound has tended to downplay the historical specificities of acoustic authenticity and the “embodied universalism” that pervades phenomenological studies of sound. Anxieties or desires in relation to the sonic realm are ineffably entangled with the co-evolutionary dynamics of the body, space, and technology; there is an oscillatory dynamic between the material and measurable, the symbolic and phantasmatic. Whereas visual culture rests on a degree of distancing between the observer and the direct object of the gaze, auditory experience is marked by a greater degree of spatial intimacy and material permeability. Yet the separation of the listener from the original sound source can engender its own forms of acoustic alienation. Recent writing on sound has sought to delineate a more nuanced auditory realm. The acoustic city transcends the limitations of the human ear; its full resonance eludes even the most ardent of listeners.

Endnotes

The full table of Gabriel Stell’s Visualizing an acous-