



The Acoustic City

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Endnotes

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- 2 John Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 3 Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).
- 4 Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) p. 120.
- 5 Theodore C. Bestor, *Neighborhood Tokyo* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989) p. 38.
- 6 Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-century French Countryside* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
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- 11 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century*, trans. Anselm Hollo (New York: Urizen, 1980 [1977]).
- 12 Michael Fisch, "Tokyo's Commuter Train Suicides and the Society of Emergence," *Cultural Anthropology* 28 (12) (2013).
- 13 Interview with Akio Suzuki by Nobushisa Shimoda, *Sound Arts* (6) (1993), XEBEC. <http://www.sukothai.com/X6.suzuki.html>
- 14 Tōru Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence: Selected Writings* (Berkeley: Fallen Leaf Press, 1995) p. 64. Japanese publication as *Oto, Chinmoku to Hakariaeru hodo ni* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1971).
- 15 Luciana Galliano, *Yōgaku: Japanese Music in the 20th Century*, trans. M. Mayes (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002).
- 16 Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence* p. 79.
- 17 Ibid. p. 81.

STRANGE ACCUMULATIONS: SOUNDSCAPES OF LATE MODERNITY IN J. G. BALLARD'S "THE SOUND-SWEEP"

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In the fiction of J. G. Ballard, urban space is conceived as a technological totality comprising an intersecting field of corporeal geographies. It is through the failure or disruption of technological systems that the vulnerability of the human body is exposed and existing social relations are placed under strain: consider the violent ruptures of *Crash* (1973), the absurd enclave of marooned commuters in *Concrete Island* (1974), or the intricate technological matrices of *High Rise* (1975). The body-technology couplings explored by Ballard move beyond the aeronautical preoccupations of Cold War cybernetics or more simplistic forms of bodily augmentation to encompass an unusual synthesis of cultural and technological elements. In this respect, his vivid explorations of the body-machine complex are redolent of modernist pioneers in graphic art such as Fritz Kahn whose work heralded an increasing interest in the liberatory potential of science and technology.¹ Ballard's familiarity with human anatomy, a result of his training as a medical student, forms a distinctive element in his corporeal style of writing. Yet his scientifically inspired literary imagination is also tempered by an ironic neo-Hobbesian fascination with modernity's denouement through eco-catastrophe or violent disorder. Ballard's world is suffused with an ideological ambivalence between the naturalization of capitalist urbanization and existing social relations, and emerging landscapes of technological possibility.

Ballard's short story entitled "The Sound-Sweep," first published in 1960 as a "novelette" in the British science fiction journal *Science Fantasy*, provides an intriguing encounter with the cultural and political complexities of late-modern soundscapes.² The story is set in a future city that appears to be a kind of hybrid between mid-twentieth-century London and Los Angeles: we encounter a divided, transmogrified, and car-dominated cityscape that combines more familiar topographic zones with new types of acoustically differentiated spaces. The increasing focus on sound has led to a series of changes in the sensory environment, including the replacement of audible sounds—such as music—with new forms of ultrasound. The direct experience of music has been increasingly replaced by an inaudible yet tightly controlled form of synthetic silence. We learn that although the classical repertoire is being "re-scored for the much wider range of the ultrasonic orchestra," the human voice, as the one instrument that cannot be satisfactorily replaced by ultrasound, is fast becoming a musical anachronism:

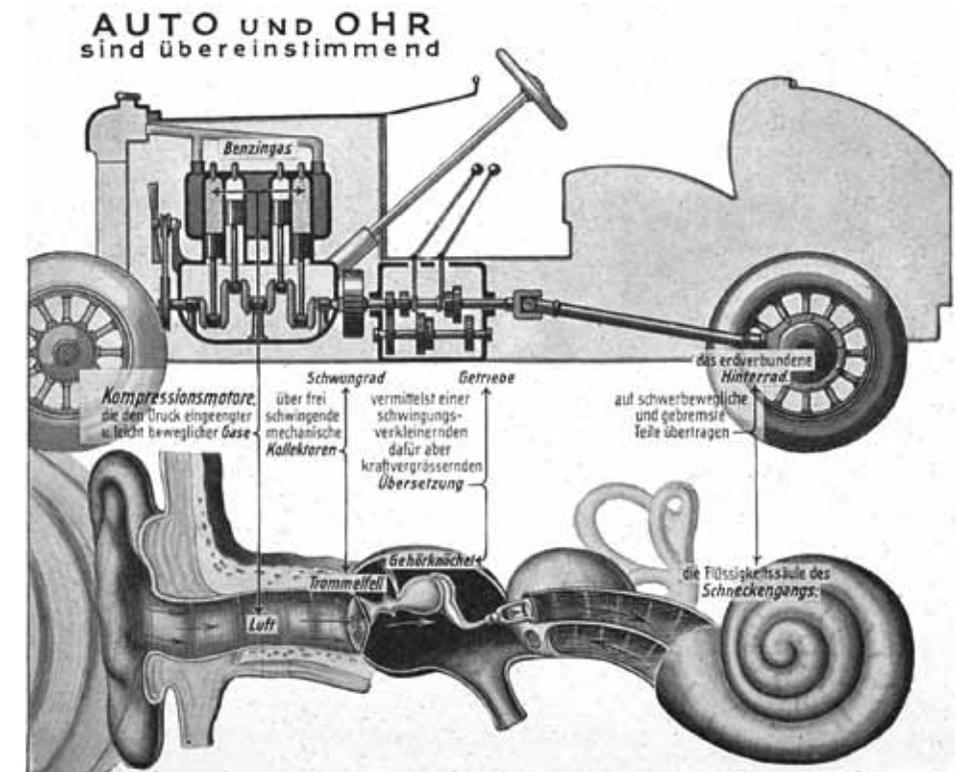
*Since the introduction a few years earlier of ultrasonic music, the human voice—indeed, audible music of any type—had gone completely out of fashion. Ultrasonic music, employing a vastly greater range of octaves, chords and chromatic scales than are audible by the human ear, provided a direct neural link between the sound stream and the auditory lobes, generating an apparently sourceless sensation of harmony, rhythm, cadence and melody uncontaminated by the noise and vibration of audible music.*³

The emergence of an increasingly synthetic acoustic realm also marks a sophisticated form of social control through the neurological effects of ultrasound. The city is increasingly marked by the prevalence of what Pierre Schaeffer and Jérôme Peignot term the *acousmatique*, whereby sounds are experienced separately from their causes to produce a "new paradigm of dislocation."⁴ Since the time in which Ballard was writing, the use of sound as a means of behavioural manipulation and also as a commodified realm in its own right has significantly expanded. Indeed, recent developments in acoustic ecology, evolutionary biology, and neurophysiology have even suggested the presence of genetically coded forms of originary soundscapes that are amenable to ultrasonic forms of sound stimulation.⁵ We find that techno-modernity has radically expanded into human subjectivity itself through intensified efforts to control the sensory realm.⁶

"The Sound-Sweep" opens with a description of an abandoned sound stage, now lying beneath the "endless din" of an eight-lane flyover, where an embittered former opera singer lives—her career having been ruined by the switch to ultrasonic music. In Ballard's city, sonic distinctions increasingly intersect with late-modern topographies of anxiety and dislocation. We are immersed in an acoustic realm where sound does not fade away but accumulates in the fabric of the city. The entire city has become a kind of acoustic sponge or giant recording device where walls and other surfaces retain a permanent trace of their sonic

environment. As sound acquires a material presence in the city, the distinction between spatial and temporal dimensions to urban space has become increasingly blurred. Architecture acquires an incriminating presence through its storage of sounds and conversations. Rather than a discretely reproducible phenomenon, sound has become a generalized source of potential disorder. It is feared that the failure to clear away "unswept sonic resonances" will not only undermine social order but also endanger the physical foundations of the city itself.⁷ The central protagonist in Ballard's story is Mangon, a municipal "sound sweep" since the age of fourteen with the Metropolitan Sonic Disposal Service, who removes the accumulation of sound from buildings, walls and other sound retaining surfaces using a device called a "sonovac." We learn that Mangon, like many other sound sweeps, has been a mute from an early age, and has consequently developed extremely sensitive hearing, which allows him to detect any trace of "embedded sounds."⁸ Despite these essential skills, however, the sound sweeps are held in contempt by wider society:

*Regarded as little better than garbage collectors, the sound-sweeps were an outcast group of illiterates, mutes (the city authorities preferred these—their discretion could be relied upon) and social cripples who lived in a chain of isolated shacks on the edge of an old explosives plant in the sand dunes to the north of the city which served as the sonic dump.*⁹



1 Fritz Kahn, *Car and ear* (1929). Source: Fritz Kahn, *Das Leben des Menschen IV* (Stuttgart: Franck'sche Verlagshandlung, 1929).



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2 Haus-Rucker-Co, *Environmental Transformer Project* (1968).
Courtesy of the Architekturbüro
O&O Baukunst.

This acoustically defined form of social stratification represents a late-modern variant of the association between dirt—in this case sonic detritus—and extreme forms of social and spatial marginalization: there are certain parallels here with the role of scheduled castes in India or the *burakumin* of Japan, who are largely restricted to dirty, menial, or dangerous forms of labour. The presence of sound sweeps in the future city underlines the continuing necessity of human labour in order to allow urban space to function: this is no automated science fiction utopia, but a noisy future metropolis riven by stark forms of social difference. The relegation of the sound sweeps to residential zones near the city’s “sonic dump” is reminiscent of those communities that eke out a living from waste, living in or around the vast garbage dumps that have developed in parallel with modern cities.

Through his work as a sound sweep, Mangon traverses the acoustic terrain of the city meeting different clients who require his specialist sound removal services. He enters the foyer of a “huge forty-storey apartment block” where “the marble walls and columns buzzed softly with the echoing chatter of guests leaving parties four or five hours earlier.”¹⁰ On entering the penthouse apartment, he meets the appropriately named Ray Alto, who is described as a “doyen of ultrasonic composers,” and clearly part of the new sonic elite. “Noise, noise, noise—the greatest single disease-vector of civilization,” declares Alto, whose apartment’s “wide studio windows” take in an “elegant panorama” of the city below.¹¹ For Alto and his wealthy neighbours, sound has become yet another focus of anxiety stalking their architectural citadels; a source of contamination that serves to blur distinctions between inside and outside, yet simultaneously enables the emergence of specialist kinds of acoustic consumption.

In a later passage, Mangon drives out towards “the stockade” used for the storage of unwanted sound:

Here and there among the dunes they could see the low ruined outbuildings of the old explosives plant, the white galvanized iron roof of one of the sound-sweep’s cabins. Desolate and unfrequented, the dunes ran on for miles. They passed the remains of a gateway that had collapsed to one side of the road; originally a continuous fence ringed the stockade, but no one had any reason for wanting to penetrate it. A place of strange echoes and festering silences, overhung by a gloomy miasma of a million compacted sounds, it remained remote and haunted, the graveyard of countless private babels.¹²

Ballard’s evocation of an acoustic miasma connects his imaginary late-modern metropolis with nineteenth-century fears of contamination. The city’s sonic edgelands mark the apotheosis of a new acoustic order in which the poor are relegated to an increasingly noisy existence. These sonic dumps have a complex topography of residual sounds contained in their “sound-absorbent baffles” that only Mangon and the other sound-sweeps can safely

navigate. The sonic detritus of the city has acquired a distinctive stratigraphy derived from different sources over time to produce a multilayered cacophonous landscape that is in “a continuous state of uproar.”¹³ Like all waste dumps, however, there is the looming threat of accidents or saturation:

*Occasionally, when super-saturation was reached after one of the summer holiday periods, the sonic pressure fields would split and discharge, venting back into the stockades a nightmarish cataract of noise, raining on to the sound-sweeps not only the howling of cats and dogs, but the multi-lunged tumult of cars, express trains, fairgrounds and aircraft, the cacophonous musique concrète of civilization.*¹⁴

Here, Ballard makes an oblique reference to experimental developments in electroacoustic music, which indicates an ambivalence towards twentieth-century modernism. Ballard’s somewhat sly use of the term *musique concrète*, most closely associated with the compositional experiments of Pierre Schaeffer, also alludes to an association between the material properties of concrete and aspects of twentieth-century modernism.¹⁵ Different materials, along with their characteristic topographies and architectural forms, are integral to the physical texture of urban space in Ballard’s writings, and it is his fascination with the sound-material interface that is perhaps the most striking element of the story. Ballard’s description of the conversion of music into ultrasound resonates with the emerging tension in the 1950s between different modes of musical composition and the shifting boundaries between music and “noise.”¹⁶

Ballard’s interest in sound as a source of anxiety links to historical concerns with bells, machinery, traffic, and other forms of sonic disturbance.¹⁷ In his story, however, the nature of sound has changed, along with its lingering presence, so that sound increasingly resembles matter through the accretion of acoustic debris on the edge of the city. Ballard’s story can be read as a portent of the contemporary accumulation of information exemplified by vast repositories of digital data. Like the sonic dumping grounds described by Ballard, the “soft landscapes” of the digital realm have produced their own edgelands in banks of humming servers and stockpiles of toxic waste.¹⁸

The politics of sound is more than just a question of “noise abatement,” but forms part of a symbolic critique of the sensory realm of modernity and its disconnection from “authentic” forms of aesthetic experience. The emphasis on enhancing the experience of listening by R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax, and others is rooted in the development of more critically aware forms of acoustic ecology. Their concerns with a diminished or degraded auditory realm feed into a broader critique of the alienating effects of techno-modernity on everyday life.¹⁹ Yet, at the same time, the search for distinctive forms of “acoustic fidelity” are not located outside of their precise cultural or historical context: the elision between aspects of acoustic ecology and the ecological critique of modernity, for example, belies the limits

to Eurocentric conceptions of the universal human subject, which have been pervasive in musicology, neurophysiology, and many other disciplines. Recent interest in the “right to silence” finds parallels with reactions towards intrusive synthetic realms such as light pollution or artificial smells. Yet silence itself remains an elusive goal since even spaces without any external sound serve merely to accentuate the sounds of the body itself.²⁰

For Ballard, the sonic realm has both a temporal and spatial porosity. There is a sense that sound, like memory, cannot be completely eradicated. Yet the chaotic accumulation of sonic waste cannot be organized into a form of collective memory that is amenable to archives, monuments, or narrative accounts of historical change. The sonic dumps on the edge of Ballard’s city, with their sound-adsorbent baffles, provide a kind of negative sonic imprint, a medley of archaeological traces of human lives like the eerie plaster casts produced from the excavations of Pompeii. These strange accumulations are also to be found in Félix Nadar’s essay on the jumbled bones of the Paris catacombs, which were once people who “had loved, had been loved.”²¹ The sonic catacombs located on the edge of Ballard’s future city, with their acoustic residues of unsorted human lives, betoken a sense of dislocation between life and death, between signal and pure noise.

Endnotes

- 1 Cornelius Borck, “Communicating the Modern Body: Fritz Kahn’s Popular Images of Human Physiology as an Industrialized World,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 32 (2007): 495–520.
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- 3 Ballard, “The Sound-Sweep” p. 49.
- 4 Michael Fowler, “On Listening in a Future City,” *Grey Room* 42 (2011): 26. See also Brian Kane, “*L’objet sonore maintenant*: Pierre Schaeffer, Sound Objects and the Phenomenological Reduction,” *Organized Sound* 12 (1) (2007): 15–24; and Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux* (Paris: Editions Le Seuil, 1966).
- 5 Fowler, “On Listening in a Future City” p. 30.
- 6 GegenSichKollektiv, “Anti-Self: Experience-less Noise,” in ed. Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan and Paul Hegarty, *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise* (London: Continuum) p. 194.
- 7 Ballard, “The Sound-Sweep” p. 49.
- 8 *Ibid.* p. 45.
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- 10 *Ibid.* p. 53.
- 11 *Ibid.* p. 54.
- 12 *Ibid.* p. 63.
- 13 *Ibid.* p. 66.
- 14 *Ibid.* p. 64.
- 15 Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2013).
- 16 See, for example, Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2007).
- 17 Emily Thompson, “Noise and Noise Abatement in the Modern City,” in *Sense of the City: An Alternative Approach to Urbanism*, ed. Mirko Zardini (Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture/Lars Müller Publishers, 2005) pp. 190–199.
- 18 The term “soft landscapes” is taken from Akira Suzuki, *Do Android Crows Fly over the Skies of an Electronic Tokyo?* (London: Architectural Association, 2001).
- 19 Fowler, “On Listening in a Future City.”
- 20 On the absence of silence, see Stefan Helmreich, “An Anthropologist Underwater: Immersive Soundscapes, Submarine Cyborgs and Transductive Ethnography,” *American Ethnologist* 34 (4) (2007): 621–627.
- 21 Félix Nadar’s essay, “Le Dessus et le dessous de Paris,” was first published in 1867 and is cited in Shelley Rice, *Parisian Views* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997) p. 159.