



soundingthenakedcity

toward a psychogeography of ambient sound

Our central idea is that of the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality. We must develop a methodical intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction, the material environment of life and the comportments which it gives rise to and which radically transform it.

Guy E. Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations" (1957)¹

The city is not the festival it used to be. Not if festival gives occasion for individual voices to rise above the din of official power. Has the avant-garde succeeded in producing an appreciation of noise or has it only contributed to the society of the spectacle's sonic counterpart? Some music critics, and social critics for that matter, would echo Jacques Attali's suspicion that the aesthetic inventiveness brought on by the musical avant-garde has failed to truly transform "the existing networks" governing the production of our acoustic culture (Attali, 136). According to Attali, the art of noise is "only a spectacle of noise" (137).

For the contemporary musician of what is presently categorized as ambient music, Attali's criticism poses a fundamental challenge.¹ Perhaps it is in deference to this challenge that so many artists producing ambient music have abandoned the city opting for an idealized natural soundscape. Indeed, can any audio artist use the city's material ambience as a means to transform the conditions of everyday life when its characteristic feature is its spectacular noise?

In this essay, I want to take up these questions as part of an effort to construct a social practice of ambient sound. Such a project is in sharp contrast to the universalist and anti-materialist aesthetic which permeates much electronic and ambient sound work. For historical perspective, in relation to the artistic avant-garde, I want to examine the radical practices of the European avant-garde movement "Situationist International" (1957-1970). With an emphasis on everyday life, the artists who comprised the SI pursued what they termed, *psychogeographical* study -- an investigation of those "spatial ambiances produced by the material arrangements of the urban scene." In the analysis of the SI, these material arrangements present a new form of social organization very different from the conditions of industrial production which existed in the time of Marx. Central to the analysis of the SI was an inquiry into these conditions of modern life as organized by late capitalism. Under the rubric of the spectacle, the SI charged that modern capital had permeated the entirety of everyday life, reducing all social relations to commodity relations to be bought and sold in the free market. Through reification, the spectacle alienated women and men from their lived relations by insisting upon their objectification as consumable goods. The artist within such a regime fabricates those objects and continually pushes the threshold of innovation for the continued proliferation of spectacle culture.

From this analysis -- which borrowed heavily from Marxist critics such as the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács, and the "Socialism or Barbarism" group in France² -- "the SI developed a kind of phenomenology of urban life."

One of the alternatives to the alienation of the city, they reasoned, should be the conscious construction of "situations," or theatrical environments inside the urban environment -- acts of cultural sabotage or diversions that might strengthen the growing bohemian subculture. "Psychogeography" was the word introduced to foreground the whole area of mental states and spatial ambiances produced by the material arrangements of the urban scene (Ball, 24).

To illustrate the operations of psychogeography this paper charts the legacy of "The Naked City," a psychogeographical map produced in 1957 by Situationist Guy Debord. Exploring the map's antecedents, the 1948 film and photographer Weegee's photo essay, both titled "Naked City," the paper traces the use of the voice-over as a technology of knowledge. The voice-over, and the power it assumes, poses particular interest within the context of Situationist practices of psychogeographic research, what the Situationists called, the *dérive*, or drifting. Using the analysis of sound from film theorists Kaja Silverman, Mary Anne Doane and Rick Altman, I want to scrutinize the function of the voice-over and the diegetical soundscape as audio constructions in dialectical struggle over spatial representation. Ultimately, such a contest reveals a theatre of sound constituted by power relations.

we are bored in the city³

In Guy Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), the prominent situationist makes the observation that at the time of his original study on the spectacle in 1967, the spectacle "had barely forty years behind it" (3). While Debord does not provide any clues as to the historical genesis of this form of social organization, art critic Jonathan Crary suggests two possibilities: the introduction of the iconoscope, television's earliest incarnation and the film *The Jazz Singer* both in 1927 (102). While the former ushered the spectacle into the domestic setting, the latter with its sync sound, brought the spectacle into the domain of human perception. Crary writes:

. . . spectacular power cannot be reduced to an optical model but is inseparable from a larger organization of perceptual consumption. Sound had of course been part of cinema in various additive forms from the beginning, but the introduction of sync sound transformed the nature of the attention that was demanded of a viewer.

Within the spectacle, attention is never given freely. We hear precisely because we obediently pay with our attention. We are convinced by film critics and historians that it is the film soundtrack which faithfully attends to the image. It is the logic that appears to govern the real. In the history of sound mixing, the early sound technicians debated whether dialogue and sound should be mixed according to the spatial relations shown within the film's diegesis. Initially, technicians espoused that if a speaker is distanced from the point-of-view of the camera, the volume and clarity of the speaker's voice should correspond to that distance.⁴ This correspondence was never put into practice. The audience may see from the viewpoint of the camera but their attention is determined by the disconnected apparatus of the microphone. Once these heterogeneous recording apparatus -- sound and image -- are skillfully "married" the result produces a

specific perceptual effect within the audience (Doane, "Ideology," 50). While the visual apparatus liberates the viewer from conventional spatial limitations -- hence the crane shot and other technologies of gravity-defying cinematography -- sound recording and mixing constructs a space of audition "offering continuity of scale as an effective stabilizer" (Altman).

the voice of the eye

We can advance our study and bring together the disparate threads of sound in cinema and the social relations of ambient sound by introducing a specific film to our discussion. In the summer of 1957, at the same time that Guy Debord issued the founding manifesto, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action" (Knabb, 17 - 25), Debord produced a document which attempted in practice to realize some of the notions prescribed in the manifesto. That document, a fragmented map of Paris titled, *The Naked City*, "acted both as a summary of many of the concerns shared by the [members of the SI], particularly around the question of the construction and perception of urban space, and as a demonstration of the directions to be explored by the Internationale Situationiste in the following years" (McDonough, 59 - 60).

Just as the cartographic elements of the map were appropriated from an existing map, the title, *The Naked City* is itself an appropriation from the American film.⁵ Reviewing the 1948 Hollywood film *The Naked City* we can speculate what about the film ignited Debord's imagination. Written by Malvin Wald and Albert Maltz and directed by Jules Dassin, *The Naked City* is a classic crime-detective film. In the film, New York homicide detectives search the city for clues leading to the capture of a murder suspect in the death of a young fashion model. One distinguishing feature of the film is an omnipresent male voice-over which frames the narrative within the context of everyday life in a large urban milieu. *The Naked City* introduces this, a most spectacular voice, in the opening scene where a panoramic aerial view is accompanied by a man's voice: "As you can see," the voice-over announces, "we're flying over an island, a city, a particular city and this is the story of a number of its people, and the story also, of the city itself."

We can be certain that it is no accident that the film's establishing shot occurs from the air. The aerial view is indivisibly bound with what Michael de Certeau calls, the "celestial eye" (92). (Hence most urban news programs begin with an establishing shot of the city as seen from a helicopter.) The voice-over which situates our aerial view in *The Naked City* incites us to ask what it is we expect to hear when occupying the space of that celestial eye? Within the diegesis of the film, New York city emerges from the early morning hours, spreading itself out before the camera. And yet, from the vantage point of the helicopter, we hear nothing of its material unfolding. The panorama of the city provided by the aerial view has no sonic analogy. Instead we hear the muffled sound of the helicopter, anchored to the voice of the narrator. While the narrator makes explicit our required identification with the point-of-view of the camera ("As you can see . . ."), our capacity to hear what we see is never articulated. For this we have the voice-over.

The camera descends from its heights and enters the morning regime of New York city. A visual record of the mundane, the film presents morning commuters, merchants and vendors taking to the sidewalks. This documentary approach stems from two influences upon the filmmakers: post-war British documentary film (Kozloff, 43) and Arthur "Weegee" Fellig's 1945 photo-essay, *Naked City* (McDonough, 61). Weegee's exhaustive portrait of New York gives attention to a variety of situations and mundane occurrences from the arrest of drag queens ("the gay deceivers") to photo-journalistic accounts of murders. Anticipating the

voice-over of the 1948 film, Weegee offers a text of personal commentary to accompany his photographs.

Echoing the journalistic conceits of Weegee's photo-essay, the film's narrator explains *The Naked City's* distinctive aesthetic: "[*The Naked City*] was not photographed in a studio. Quite the contrary. Barry Fitzgerald, our star, Howard Duff, Dorothy Hart, Don Taylor, Ted de Corsia and the other actors played out their roles on the streets, in the apartment houses, in the skyscrapers, of New York itself." The pseudo-documentary approach may explain the omnipresent voice-over. The practical challenges surrounding on-location sound recording may have necessitated such a device which not only provides continuity from shot to shot but in many cases actually ventiloquates characters' speech.

In her article, "Humanizing 'The Voice of God': Narration in *The Naked City*," Sarah Kozloff cites from the film instances which exemplify film-theorist Pascal Bonitzer's claim that "'the power of the voice is a stolen power, a usurpation.' Sometimes," writes Kozloff, "especially during exterior scenes when sync-sound recording would have been too difficult, the narrator literally takes words out of characters' mouths and either summarizes their conversations in indirect discourse, or speaks their dialogue himself" (45). It would be beneficial to our own project to ask from whom has the voice-over stolen its power to speak? Within the spectacle of cinema, that power is inextricably linked with the coercion of attention. Crary writes: "The full coincidence of sound with image . . . instituted a more commanding authority over the observer, enforcing a new kind of attention" (102). We can extend the evocation of attention to what Altman describes as point-of-audition sound, "constitut[ing] the perfect interpolation" (60 - 61). A film's soundtrack performs its synchronization with the image as a spatial construction. In the space of the soundtrack, the voice-over labors to interpret the visual image, and in the example of *The Naked City*, that image is of the city itself.

Giving voice to a spectrum of pedestrians within an urban ambience, the narrator of *The Naked City* sounds a silenced motion picture image. By performing such a *sounding*, the narrator speaks from a position inscribed by the power it claims for itself. Clearly, the identity of the narrator would bear a degree of significance. Not all voice-overs bear marks of distinction,⁶ but in this case, the voice of the eye discloses its own specificity. "Ladies and Gentlemen," the voice-over addresses his audience, "the motion picture you are about to see is called *The Naked City*. My name is Mark Hellinger; I was in charge of its production."

With these words, the first to be heard from our celestial eye while circling high above Manhattan, our narrator introduces himself. Hellinger was probably best known in 1948 as a star columnist/journalist for Randolph Hearst's *Daily Mirror*. As a speech act, Hellinger's self-disclosure summarily incorporates the apparatus, the "machine as organism" (Williams, 58), as well as our understanding. That this specific voice is the film's producer exposes its material investment in the enunciatory function. Contained within the *sonorous envelope*⁷ of the voice is the terrain of social relations. In the example of *The Naked City*, Hellinger *sounds* his subjectivity -- for identification purposes -- within the space opened up by silencing the urban soundscape. The story of the city -- the city as performer -- can only come into cinematic representation through silencing. The sound-mixing techniques employed to supplant diegetical sounds with the voice of the film producer provide the point-of-audition necessary to insert the audience in a stabilizing sonic space.

The voice-over of Hellinger, as the producer of meaning and audiences (the producer of attention), must speak by silencing the aleatory field of competing noises. He must exist outside the ambience which he claims to *sound*. Hence an

audience is produced by identifying with the plenitude of his voice and disavowing their own contingency with the cacophony of everyday life, which Hellinger "represents" in his enunciation. In fact, to enter into that cacophony would be the death of the narrator and, by identification, death of the audience. This point is made explicit in the narrative itself by signifying immersion as negation. It is not accidental that the plot reaches its climax just as the murderer, shot by police, tumbles from the Williamsburg Bridge to drown in the waters of the East River. This death has been prefigured for us in the film's opening sequence as our narrator takes us to the scene of the crime where the murder victim is found immersed in a water-filled bathtub. In relationship to the omnipresence of the voice-over, the only element and character outside the space of Hellinger's capacity to *sound* is Jean Dexter, the woman whose murder the film attempts to solve by laying naked the city and the clues it conceals.

from one naked city to another

I would argue that by appropriating the title of the American film for his own psychogeographic map, situationist Guy Debord detoured the apparatus of the voice-over, its capacity to spatialize and to *sound*. In both examples of *The Naked City*, film and map, a subjective voice constructs ambience. It is in the very function of the voice-over to produce spatial perception. The difference between the practices of Hellinger's voice-over the construction of ambiances documented in Debord's map is precisely the voice-over's relationship to the spectacle. This observation extends Debord's own scopic-centered definition of the spectacle. "The spectacle, insisted Debord, is not 'a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images,' nor a 'collection of images'; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Plant, 34). In the case of the film, the construction of ambience is only possible *within* an "image" provided by various "self-effacing sound practices" (Williams, 63). In other words, the voice-over provided by Hellinger attempts to *sound* the ambient field while remaining non-contingent with that field. For Debord, on the other hand, the construction of ambience is accomplished on the ruins of the spectacle where the subject is contingent with that field, articulated through that field. This then could offer a helpful distinction between that *sounding* which merely rehearses the spectacle of noise and that which interrupts its conditions of production.

Examining Debord's *The Naked City*, the reader finds no identifiably singular voice. Should one use the map to excavate such a voice, the entire network of competing voices would always remain contingent. It is this network that we perceive as the ambient soundscape. To construct ambience subjectively or, in the language of the situationists, within a "passional quality," that cacophony of noises always remains within earshot. But as to whether that cacophony is itself equivalent to the spectacle of noise, to what extent is ambient noise reducible to a sonorous plenitude? Significantly, Kaja Silverman explains how any pre-linguistic, pre-mediated plenitude signified by a *sonorous envelope* is a fantasy either vilified as castrating or reified through celebration (73). This analysis is crucial because it suggests that any attempt to reduce sound to "an after-the-fact construction or reading of a situation which is fundamentally irrecoverable" (Silverman, *ibid.*) recuperates sound within the spectacle. The spectacle of noise forever *sounds* our acoustic environment apart from the social relations of everyday life. One could raise the objection, has not Debord himself simply rehearsed the spectacle in his psychogeographic map? Such a judgment however fails to consider the performative nature of the map. The map is only a totality apart from practice. Its performance realizes its capacity to *sound*. But obviously it is disingenuous to praise a map for not being a film or faulting a film for not being a map. However, I would suggest that both are performative texts

and as such constitutive of space. For this reason, I have read both representations of the city as performances of urban ambience.

To this end, I would argue, situationist practices such as psychogeography and the *dérive* go beyond a study of acoustic culture toward articulating its "sum of possibilities" (Knabb, 7). Quoting the words of Jean Barrott in his critique of the SI, the efficacy of a radical sound practice is determined "by the capacity of those who possess it to put it to subversive use -- not by a sudden flash, but by a mode of presentation and diffusion which leaves traces, even if scarcely visible ones" (13). Or, rather, even traces left scarcely audible. The critique of fashion is overt in this sentiment, by which we may want to conclude that ambience as a sonic terrain is not so much available to us through the marketing success (or failure) of a music industry, but rather the traces of subversion left on our acoustic cultures.

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¹ In 1960, French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre said of this challenge; "When our friend Jean Duvignaud said in his book *Pour entrer dans le XXe Siècle* that [art] should accept the challenge of industrial civilization, he noted a fact: that for the moment it was incapable of doing so. I think this inability is permanent" (350).

² Situationist Guy Debord was temporarily a member of the "Socialism or Barbarism" collective, as was the philosopher of the post-modern Jean-Francois Lyotard. Debord's membership went against SI policy prohibiting members from dual membership with other artistic or political organizations. He eventually left the group in 1960 following his participation in an international conference organized by "Socialism or Barbarism" in response to the Belgium strike of that year. For a more detailed account of the relationship between the two organizations, see Barrot.

³ The opening words of the intensely youthful and utopian pre-situationist text "Formulary for a New City" (Knabb, 1).

⁴ For an in-depth discussion of this history, see Rick Altman's "Sound Space" in *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*; 46 - 64.

⁵ I credit Thomas F. McDonough and his article, "Situationist Space" for revealing the connection between the situationist document of 1957 and film of nine years before. Curiously, in McDonough's otherwise insightful essay, he never speaks to the relationship between the voice-over of the film and the narrativization of space which is central to his discussion. In fact, his argument remains firmly entrenched within a visual bias faithful to the situationists' own narrow focus on the visual image. I would argue that such a limitation not only restricts our understanding of Spectacle culture, but limits our ability to engender effective strategies of intervention.

⁶ For an important discussion on this matter in terms of the gendering of cinematic space, see Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema. "

⁷ For theorist Kaja Silverman, the term "sonorous envelope" traces the materiality of sound within a specific psychoanalytic formation of the listening subject. While the space of this essay does not permit an adequate representation of her argument, I hope that by employing her terms I can add a practical dimension to her own theorization of the subject of sound.

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