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sounding

THE NAKED CITY

.toward a psychogeography of ambient sound

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 affect "a real rupture in the existing networks" governing the production of our acoustic culture (136). For Attali, the art of noise celebrated in the avant-garde from Luigi Russolo through to John Cage is "only a spectacle of noise" (137). For the contemporary musician of ambiance, such a 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 ambiance as a means to transform the busyness and banality of everyday life when its characteristic feature is its spectacular noise?

We offer these questions partly in the spirit of yesterday's revolutionaries: an homage to the notion of transformation. It is a romantic yearning for practices of art which inquire upon the conditions of their production while simultaneously intervening upon those same conditions. Such was the avowed endeavor of those avant-garde artists who forty years ago came together as the situationist international, or SI. Composed of artists from a variety of late-50s European avant-garde groups, the situationists sought to "realize" art as a social practice (Knabb, 145).

From the Dadaist vanguard of the teens and twenties [the situationists] took an urge to destroy art; from the surrealists, an aim to reconstitute it at the level of everyday life. From modernism in architecture they developed a utopian urbanism, in part derived from Bauhaus, but superseding it in an effort to widen its formalist and populist tendencies into a general political study of urban space (Ball, 24).

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).

Central to the analysis of the SI was an inquiry into the 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 this 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 both 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 S.I. 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 (ibid.).

From the perspective of the contemporary avant-garde, the situationists developed a significant practice of art routed in the sphere of everyday life. In the premiere issue of the French journal *Internationale Situationiste*, the specifics surrounding the construction of ambiance is delineated in the article, "Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation" (Knabb, 43-45). The text outlines a form of street-theater, anarchic and anti-hierarchical where each role of "director," "direct agents," and "passive *spectators*" "never become a permanent specialization" (44). Within this fluidity of positions, an event maximizes participation much like a political demonstration or the street theatrics of civil disobedience. In fact, the construction of situations proposes counter-forms of attention: "that which changes our way of seeing the streets . . ." (25). For this reason the situationists opposed the reduction of urban design to mere architecture, advocating in its place practices which embrace the totality of the urban experience. According to the situationists, technocratic specializations such as architecture and ecology contribute to the alienation of persons from the space of everyday life, under the sign of the Spectacle. In counter-action to this spectacularization of urban space, the situationists

² Situationist Guy Debord was temporarily a member of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, contrary to SI policy prohibiting members from dual membership with other artistic or political organizations. Debord eventually left the group in 1960 following his participation in an international conference organized by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in response to the Belgium strike of that year (Barrot, 21). For a more detailed account of the relationship between the two organizations, see Barrot.

proposed the "concrete construction of momentary ambiances" (22) which reclaimed each distinct environment of the city, including our "acoustic environment" (23) for the purposes of play and political intervention.

Beyond the obvious affinities with contemporary ambient music and other audio arts, this essay shall explore the possibilities within the SI conception of ambiance for a practice of sound which is simultaneously materialist (as opposed to the discourse of metaphysical transcendence afflicting much work produced within the ambient genre) and expressive in its deployment. While such an inquiry can easily span the course of several volumes, I shall proceed within the limits of an archeology of urban acoustics. In concert with the situationists own investigation into Spectacle culture, our field of intervention shall be the Spectacle of noise.

"We are bored in the city"³

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 further 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.⁴ 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

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

⁴ It is important to recall that the verb, *to obey*, is the etymological root for audition, audience and auditory.

volume and clarity of the speaker's voice should correspond to that distance.⁵ This correspondence was never put widely into practice. The audience may see from the viewpoint of the camera but their audition is determined by the disconnected apparatus of the microphone. Once these heterogenous recording apparata -- 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." Film historian, Rick Altman writes:

Indeed, if we take the risk of flying about at all, it is certainly in large part because we know that our bodies are anchored by sound, and by the single, continuous experience that it offers. It is thus the soundtrack which provides a base for visual identification, that authorizes vision and makes it possible. The identity of Hollywood spectators begins with their ability to be auditors" (ibid.).

The construction of the soundtrack is analogous to a production of space where the interpolation of the audience in that space is interconstitutive with their status as listening subjects. As a social technology, a technology which organizes the relationship between the audience and the world, cinema produces an attention grounded in the spatial orientation of sound. Simply, cinema sound produces the *position* of audition.

An examination of sound-editing techniques reveals the precise ways in which an audience is interpolated into cinematic space. Technicians use directed microphones to record dialogue and other sound effects "organic" to the diegesis, or, the space of the scene. These key elements are then mixed within a diegetic soundscape. To simulate the differentiation usually accomplished by cognition, those key sounds such as dialogue are then given priority in the mix over all others. Without such techniques, the "ambient [sic] noise track" would give equal status to all sounds, threatening a sound-image synchronization (Williams, 63). The camera may present the audience with a panoramic vision, the soundtrack, however, is meticulously constructed to achieve what would be impossible for any unmediated sound recording. From the employment of these mixing techniques specific to the voice, Altman concludes: "Hollywood cinema thus established, in the course of the thirties, a careful balance between a 'forbidden' image, which we watch as voyeurs, and 'sanctioned' dialogue, which appears to be addressed

⁵ For an indepth discussion of this history, see Rick Altman's essay, "Sound Space" in Sound Theory/Sound Practice; 46-64.

directly to the audience" (63). By addressing the audience, an intimacy of sound interpolates the listener into the soundscape. In this way, the surround-sound of cinema, fashionably isolated as a technological advancement is, in fact, the general performative aspect of cinema. Consequently, the ideological demands placed on the audience as listeners are never exposed and, even extra-diegetical speech such as the voice-over or interior dialogue, rarely carries traces of artifice. However, "the use of the voice-[over] always entails a risk -- that of exposing the material heterogeneity of the cinema" (Doane, "The Voice," 40).

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 moment 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 itself is an appropriation of an American film.⁶ Reviewing the 1948 Hollywood film The Naked City, we can speculate what about the film ignited Debord's imagination. Written and directed by Albert Maltz and Malvin Wald, The Naked City, is a classic crime-detective 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. The distinguishing feature in this simple film is an omnipresent male voice-over which frames the narrative within the context of everyday life in a large urban milieu. More precisely, the voice-over could be described as providing a voice for the image. 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-

⁶ I credit Thomas F. McDonough and his article, "Situationist Space" for revealing the connection between the situationist document of 1957 and the 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 the Spectacle but limits our ability to engender appropriate strategies of intervention.

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. French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau identified this perspective as the pleasure "of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts" (92). De Certeau explains how the "celestial eye" was as much a part of the pre-modern imagination when "the desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it." Now we expect no less. The aerial view is indivisibly bound with the celestial eye. (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 near-documentary approach stems from two influences upon the filmmakers: post-war British documentary film (Kozloff, 43) and Arthur "Weegee" Fellig's 1945 photo-essay of the same name (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, a dominating characteristic of the book is Weegee's personal commentary accompanying his photographs. One could argue that the matters of knowledge central to the work of the crime detective and the journalist become explicit in the appearance of this commentary voice. In both the murder images and the drag queens in paddy wagons, the narrated image becomes conflated with the law: the law of a fidelity to the image. This device is exploited fully in Maltz and Wald's film. For while The Naked City borrows from documentary film, its conventions are lifted from the sort of crime-detective photography celebrated in Weegee's book.⁷

⁷ Weegee goes as far as to provide an appendix which details helpful hints for the amateur photographer interested precisely this sort of photo-journalism.

Echoing the influence of Weegee's photo-essay, the narrator explains the film'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 ventriloquates characters' speech. An alternative perspective, which would make this more practical reasoning available in the first place has to do with the dual function performed by the voice-over.

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 audience is interpolated as the listening subject. Competing with this function 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 ambiance, 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. A power acquisitioned in the very act of articulating the city. Given this fact, the identity of the narrator would bear a degree of significance. Not all voice-overs bear marks of distinction⁸, but in this case, the voice of the eye discloses its own specificity. "Ladies and Gentlemen," the voice-over addresses his

⁸ For an important discussion on this matter in terms of the gendering of cinematic space, see Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema."

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. It is a speech act that summarily incorporates the apparatus, the "machine as organism" (Williams, 58), as well as our understanding. That this specific voice-over is the film's producer exposes its material investment in the enunciatory function. Contained within the disembodied *sonorous envelop*⁹ 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. In this sense we share Kaja Silverman's hesitation to endorse Kozloff's reading of Hellinger's voice as materialized by its specificity. As Silverman states in a footnote to The Acoustic Mirror: "[Kozloff's] analysis [is] too dependent upon narrative literary models, and too quick to assume that the individuating features of Mark Hellinger's voice undercut the privileged position that voice occupies" (23). According to Kozloff, the grain of Hellinger's voice immediately brings the material body into the diegesis, this despite the extra-diegetical nature of the voice-over (Kozloff, 43). Furthermore, Kozloff's analysis fails to consider just how subjectivity is produced through a series of disavowals and identifications.

By considering the relationship between the organization of sonic elements according to the mechanisms of audition, interpolation and attention we might trace more accurately the mechanisms by which subjectivity is produced through the interpretation of "an implied set of acoustic events" (Williams, 63). Primary in our consideration is the authority claimed by the voice-over by identifying himself as producer. In the synecdodal model of production provided by the Hollywood film industry, the producer is the capitalist *sine qua non*. In this sense, the cinematic Spectacle is enunciated precisely as such through the attention demanded of the audience to this highly invested voice. The sound-mixing techniques employed to supplant diegetical sounds with the voice of the film-producer provide the aural plenitude necessary to insert the audience in a stabilizing sonic space.

The voice-over of Hellinger, as the producer of meaning and audiences, must speak by silencing the aleatory field of competing noises. He must repress his contingency within the ambience

⁹ The term "sonorous envelope" was developed by theorist Kaja Silverman as a way of tracing the materiality of sound within a specific psychoanalytical formation of the listening subject. While the space of this paper 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.

which he claims to *sound*. Hence an audience is produced by identifying with the *sonorous envelope* of his voice, but then they are objectified by given no 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 film itself by signifying emersion as negation. It is not accidental that the narrative 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: death by drowning. In fact, in relationship to the omnipresence of the voice-over, the only element of the diegesis clearly 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 suppresses. We might even argue that the corpse of the woman is the essential opposite grounding both the status of the narrator and procuring *his* omnipotence in giving voice to that which the city secrets within its own corpus. In the diegetical frame of The Naked City, immersion is not the trope of power but its negation through castration (Silverman, 72-73).

From one Naked City to another (courtesy the voice-over)

We would argue that by appropriating the title of the American film for his own psychogeographic map, situationist Guy Debord detourned the dialectical apparatus of the voice-over: its capacity to spatialize and to *sound*. In both examples of The Naked City, a subjective voice constructs ambiance. It is in the very function of the voice-over to produce spatial perception. The difference between the practices of Hellinger's voice-over and the construction of ambiances documented in Debord's map is precisely the voice-over's relationship to the Spectacle. Indeed, this observation extends Debord's own 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 ambiance is only possible *within* an "image" provided by various "self-effacing sound practices" (Williams, 63). By *within* we mean to suggest that 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 ambiance is accomplished on the ruins of the Spectacle.

Just as reading the cinematic Naked City as a aural composition reveals the power relations in the operation of the voice-over, what might we discover by rendering Guy Debord's Naked City as a score for the production of sound? In its performativity, Debord's psychogeographic map functions similarly to another performative text of the same era. In 1958, months after the

release of Debord's The Naked City, the American avant-garde composer John Cage revealed his experimental score Fontana Mix. Ostensibly a score for magnetic tape, Fontana Mix is a radically open text printed on plastic transparencies intended for an indeterminate number of tape tracks, performers and instruments. Devoid of conventional staves and musical notation, Fontana Mix more closely resembles a map or blueprint, delineating any number of paths through an unspecified terrain. Due to its enigmatic character, the score when "performed" can result in radically different interpretations.¹⁰

Similar to the Cage score, the psychogeographical map offers no hierarchical reading but rather a "sum of possibilities." The Naked City is composed of distinct areas of Paris literally cut-out from the well-known *Plan de Paris*. These fragments, printed in black, are then linked by bold red directional arrows. On the backside of The Naked City, a text by Swedish artist and situationist Asger Jorn explains how the arrangement of the map represents "the spontaneous turns of direction taken by a subject moving through these surroundings in disregard of the useful connections that ordinarily govern his conduct" (McDonough, 60). The possible patterns of moving through the city offered in the map, illustrate the situationist concept of the *dérive*. As one means of conducting psychogeographic study, the *dérive* "is the practice of a passionate journey out of the ordinary through rapid changing of ambiances" (Knabb, 23). The dialectical contradiction of the situationist Naked City becomes evident when we consider the detoured narrative of the *Plan de Paris*. As an official narrative of the city and its internal relations, the *Plan de Paris* attempts to totalize the Parisian urban landscape within a perspective assailable from the point of view of the map's reader. The situationist map of Paris is, as the subtitle "Illustration of the hypothesis of psychogeographical turntables" suggests, only intelligible through use. That use, as defined by Debord and his situationist comrades is specific to a transformation of the urban milieu. "For Debord the structure of Paris, like that of New York in the movie, was also a 'great obstacle' that simultaneously offered 'tiny clues' -- only they were no longer clues to the solution of a crime, but to a future organization of life in its presentation of a 'sum of possibilities'" (McDonough, 62).

Examining Debord's The Naked City, the reader finds no identifiable singular voice. Should one use the map to excavate such a voice, the entire network of competing voices would always

¹⁰ One need only compare Cage's own version "Aria with Fontana Mix" with Max Neuhaus' approach in 1968 to appreciate the openness of the score. Cage's interpretation combines magnetic tape with a vocal performance by opera singer Catherine Berberian. While the tape portion of the performance utilized cut-up techniques, the singer's contribution mimics the cut-up process as Berberian leaps across vocal styles, genres and even moving from language to glossalalia. In Neuhaus' interpretation, audio feedback is the sole source of sound which then Neuhaus arranges on a stereophonic field using the directions suggested in the Fontana Mix.

remain contingent. In fact, it is this network that we perceive as the ambient field. To construct *ambiance* 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 of noise 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" (ibid) recuperates sound within the Spectacle. In other words, the Spectacle of noise forever "images" our acoustic environment apart from the social relations of everyday life. Now 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 represent. But obviously it is disingenuous to praise a map for not being a film or faulting a film for not being a map. However, we can suggest that both are performative texts and as such, constitutive of space. For this reason, we have read both representations of the city as performances of urban ambiance.

To this end, we would argue, situationist practices such as psychogeography and the *dérive* go beyond a study of acoustic culture toward articulating its "*sum of possibilities*." 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" (Barrot, 13) -- or, rather, even traces of subversion scarcely audible.

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