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A Beautiful Noise Emerging from the Apparatus of an Obstacle: Trains and the Sound of the Japanese City

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Peer reviewed

The Acoustic City

MATTHEW GANDY, BJ NILSEN [EDS.]

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and space. The voices float monotonously over commercial and privatized zones, fusing an image of feminized “Englishness” with that of corporate culture. In other words, they are *symbolic* of the destruction of the welfare state and the ambiguity of the “public,” as we witness it being finally hacked to death, but they are not *representative* of those doing the destroying (need it be pointed out that it is women and children who suffer most in times of economic crisis and benefit cuts). They are ideological sonic veneer for what lies beneath, the sonic equivalent of the “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster and its myriad spin-offs, a fusion of war and crisis made cute for the middle classes.

But what shall we do with the voices, the recordings that have replaced the real bodies of announcers and cashiers? We could do worse than to begin to pay attention to what they are saying, and not saying; of what they tell us about gender and the contemporary city, of where the power lies and where it doesn't, of the ideological function of “certain” voices and the exclusion of others. The protester in the street chanting spontaneous slogans hears her opponent in every beat of the neo-liberal city: to reclaim the machines—from supermarket tills to parliamentary processes—we must first identify who speaks in the voice of the enemy, and who speaks from elsewhere.

Endnotes

- 1 I use the term “female-sounding” to indicate that I am not interested in the normative question—what should “men” and “women” sound like if they are to perform “maleness” and “femaleness,” as if this was anyway decidable—but rather for examining the intention of the companies that use voices that they have explicitly picked to “sound female.” It is clear that when hearing voices we tend to “gender” them quickly, and often without reflecting on any assumptions that follow from this apparent recognition. I want to ask instead why the “female-sounding” voice has become a key sonic element in the urban landscape, and ask what it means for the maintenance of the running and order of the city.
- 2 A Nectar card is a reward card that contains points gathered through purchasing.
- 3 Though it should be noted that the story of Emma Clarke and her tube announcements is rather more complicated than we might initially think. See my earlier short piece on “The Dystopian Technology of the Female Voice” for the Her Noise Archive (2012): <http://hernoise.org/nina-power/>
- 4 <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN02936/women-international-womens-day-2013-background-statistics>.
- 5 http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/archival_sounds/2010/08/womens-voices-calling-the-shots-in-recorded-announcements.html.
- 6 “Old Street,” for example always comes to mind, as the way Emma Clarke pronounces it captures exactly the pitch and tone I mention above.
- 7 See her track “From The Air” from her LP *Big Science* (1982), and her widespread use of audio drag filters.

A BEAUTIFUL NOISE EMERGING FROM THE APPARATUS OF AN OBSTACLE: TRAINS AND THE SOUNDS OF THE JAPANESE CITY

David Novak

Japan's modernity has long been characterized by the proposal of its unique sensory culture, and the question of its survival in the face of urbanization. As early as 1898, Lafcadio Hearn described Japanese attention to environmental sounds as part of a special perceptual mode, which, he argued, was a cultural resource endangered by industrial Westernization:

Surely we have something to learn from the people in whose mind the simple chant of a cricket can awaken whole fairy-swarms of tender and delicate fancies. We may boast of being their masters in the mechanical, their teachers of the artificial in all its varieties of ugliness; but in the knowledge of the natural—in the feeling of the joy and beauty of earth—they exceed us like the Greeks of old. Yet perhaps it will be only when our blind aggressive industrialism has wasted and sterilized their paradise—substituting everywhere for beauty the utilitarian, the conventional, the vulgar, the utterly hideous—that we shall begin with remorseful amazement to comprehend the charm of that which we destroyed.¹

Hearn's identification of this local senseworld, then, was (like so many other fascinated narratives of intercultural discovery) already marked by its inevitable extinction. The future of the Japanese soundscape was bound up, part and parcel, with the colonial construction of

the Japanese nation-state; the inexorable loss of native culture was projected forward into the destructive technoculture of the global industrial city.

Then, as now, the major sonic feature of cities was noise. Public attention to street noise helped establish new divisions between public and private space, and became a crucial point of dispute for class-biased social reforms. The characterization of a particular neighbourhood as “noisy” often turned on the threat of a destabilizing (and often foreign) urban population, which needed to be reduced or eliminated in order to maintain or recover the “original” local soundscape. In Victorian London, for example, anti-noise campaigns targeted Italian organ grinders, whose street music triggered bourgeois anxiety about migrant labour.² Both in the changing labour market, and in the advancement of machines into public life, noise was so closely tied to modern progress that “noise pollution” appeared to be a kind of waste created by urbanization.³ Noise was considered powerful and technologically progressive, but fundamentally uncivilized and dangerous; thus it quickly became a key sonic metaphor for rapid and unfettered social change, as well as the magical transformations of urban modern space. Identifications of noise were increasingly mitigated by the demands of cultural progress. In the fatalistic words of an 1878 noise ruling regarding the new elevated train in New York City, the noise of industrial society simply “has to be.”⁴

But specific city soundscapes can yet be heard to possess unique mixes of noise, which help organize the sonic and affective sensibilities of their populations. In a “typical” Tokyo district (the pseudonymously-named Miyamoto-cho) circa 1983, Theodore Bestor catalogued the distinctively “raucous and annoying” sounds of everyday “daytime noise” that mixed “the honking of horns and the screeching of brakes; the blare of stereos and televisions on display in local shops; the many loudspeaker trucks making political commercials, or public service announcements; the recorded music from the shopping street; the junior high school’s outdoor public address system; the rumble of passing trains.”⁵ The local sound “mix” helps to mark the experience of place, as the ringing of bells, for example, sonically marked the boundaries of eighteenth-century French villages,⁶ or as the commercial “village” of a shopping mall uses pre-recorded music to organize the social and spatial experiences of wandering customers.⁷

The special character of Tokyo’s soundscape is often symbolized through its technological noises. Canadian experimental composer Sarah Peebles’ soundscape recording *108-Walking through Tokyo at the Turn of the Century* mixes sounds ranging from pre-taped advertisements and video games, to the short electronic tunes played as trains arrive in Shinjuku station, the clanking of wheels on the Sobu line, and the resonant almost-chanted voices of the announcements played in subway cars. These sounds, Yoshimura Hiroshi argues in the liner notes, represent “something extra” beyond the “uniform information of the globalized digital world” in Tokyo’s soundscape; “almost like body odor, so that the noise of the city that might have been perceived as bothersome becomes soothing.”⁸

One of the most commonly identified features of the modern Japanese soundscape is the special sensory and social environment of its trains. In 1966, the Capitol LP *Japan: Its Sounds and People* used recordings of trains to represent aspects of the local Tokyo soundscape, claiming to represent an array of essentially Japanese sounds, “infinite in variety,” which include several recordings of musical performance, food vendors, and festivals. Although the liner notes claim “noise is not truly typical of Japan,” most of the public sounds on the album were dominated by mechanical noise, including a recording of an electric train, described by narrator Rose Okugawa as a “distinctive Japanese sound.”⁹ How does the noise of the train—that ubiquitous machine and core metaphor of modern technological civilization—come to symbolize any kind of specificity, sonic or otherwise, about Japanese urban culture?

As Walter Benjamin put it, the sounds of mechanized transport are “the signature tunes of modern cities”—“the diesel stammer of London taxis, the wheeze of its buses. The clatter of the Melbourne tram. The two-stroke sputter of Rome ... the many sirens of different cities”—these different machine sounds “remind us the city is a sort of machine” replicated in industrial societies around the world.¹⁰

Wolfgang Schivelbusch described the introduction of the train as a formative project of modern subjectivity.¹¹ The train made social life calculable: it ran by a timetable and separated travellers into compartments, “annihilating” space and time in a decontextualized and blurred “panorama.” Peripheral local places were detached from their isolation, and brought into the range of the cities. The train forced the reordering of urban space to accommodate changes in human traffic, and demanded new contexts of circulation in the exchange of goods, people, and modes of communication. Populations sped toward the cities, and the physical jolt of the train on the tracks communicated a new and shocking experience of travel beyond human and animal capacity. In short, the sensory environment of the train mediated the public experience of urban modernity on a global scale.

For Japan, the introduction of the train system was iconic of the nation’s entry into global modernity: the *shinkansen* (bullet train), in particular, became a marker of Japan’s post-war economic ascendancy. The cultural symbolism of the train system also reflects dark anxieties about the precariousness of millennial Japanese society. The 1996 sarin gas attacks resonated as much for the misanthropic assault on the inviolable social space of the train, as for the spectacle of religious fanaticism presented by the Aum Shinrikyo cult. In April 2005, more than one hundred commuters were killed when a Japan Railways train jumped the tracks and crashed into an apartment building in Amagasaki, just north of Osaka. And, famously, the train tracks are a place for suicides, reported as “body accidents” that clot the circulatory flow of Tokyo’s vast railway network.¹²

But for many Japanese, the local train also epitomizes the communal aspects of public space, and the shared sensory experience provides a sense of cultural intimacy. In stark contrast to the aura of progress, loneliness, and distance of the train in the American soundscape, the train is marked as a domestic-but-urban-space in Japanese city life. While the

interiors of trains are inherently noisy places, Japanese riders tend to fall asleep, somehow rising and disembarking just as they arrive at their desired station. In the noisy enclosure of the homebound train, there is a kind of public contemplation of a balanced human and mechanical environment that feels natural.

Sound artist Suzuki Akio captured the homey and nostalgic qualities of the Japanese railway through his mix of field recordings made on station platforms in the outskirts of Tokyo:

I made records of the sound of the ticket punchers on the Yamanote Line—they've changed over to automatic wickets now, so you can't hear that sound anymore. I started noticing these masterly performances and took the outer track of the line from Tokyo Station all the way around, got off, and made recordings of that "chaki, chaki" sound at each station. The recordings were divided between the A and B side according to the order of the stations, and the endless locking ring at the end of each side had the shrill sound of the train's departure bell. In the midst of the ticket punching sounds, you can hear the cute voices of elementary school students on their way home saying things like, "Bye-bye! See you!"¹³

Suzuki's recordings capture a personal memory of a specific local cultural space, but also recall the recurrence of railway sounds in the historical register of post-war experimental music. It is no coincidence that the sound chosen by Pierre Schaeffer for the first *musique concrète* piece *Étude aux Chemins de Fer (Railway Study)* (1948), was, as the title suggests, a recording of a train, its whistle, and the conductor's announcement. And yet, despite their global ubiquity, trains and other technological sounds can be heard as markers of local place and associated with sensory qualities of cultural intimacy.

In his early writings about Japanese aural sensibilities, the post-war composer Takemitsu Tōru described his discovery of noise as a context of listening to silence. He used the word *chinmoku* to refer to silence in his famous 1971 essay "Oto, Chinmoku to hakariaeru hodo ni," included with others written over the course of several decades in his influential book *Confronting Silence*. There is an interesting slippage between the Japanese title of the book—which means something like "considering sound and silence"—and the English-language translation. "Silence" here is *chinmoku*, a word that implies an internal state of contemplation that is reticent to action. This "hesitation in silence" reflects considered listening, in which silence naturally occurs in the world through human perception. Distinct from confrontation, this state "considers" (or alternately, "measures," or "observes" [*hakararu*]) silence in relation to sound; here Takemitsu chooses *oto*, a word that does not distinguish between musical sounds and noise. In other words, "noise" and "silence" are not mutually exclusive, but related experiences within a broad spectrum of environmental "soundings" realized in listening.

Takemitsu's interest in environmental silence was entwined with an equally radical attention to technological noise. His compositions, he argued, do not describe natural spaces

devoid of "seamy" human life, but aspire to harmonize humanity with nature by using noise, to "confront silence." For example, in the noisy *sawari* sound made when the string buzzes against the grooved plate of a *biwa*, Takemitsu heard a "deliberate obstruction" that was yet a central part of the instrument's expression—a "beautiful noise" emerging from the "apparatus of an obstacle."¹⁴ Beginning in his early experiments in the NHK electronic music studio, the composer was attracted to "beautiful noises" that were created by the new synthesizer technology.

But for Takemitsu, noise was isolated neither to electronically generated sounds, nor to the rich noise sonorities of traditional Japanese instruments. Rather, noise was a fundamentally "peopled" vibration foundational in the human sensorium, which must be included in music that seeks to reflect the nature of the world. In his later compositions, noise became a musical value that reconciled composition with the "diverse, sometimes contradictory sounds around us."

As early as 1955, Takemitsu mixed recordings of the Tokyo countryside with noises of the city soundscape in *Hi (Fire)*, a collaboration with poet Yasushi Inoue created for the NHK programme *Shin Nihon Hōsō* (New Japanese Radio); he later remixed the same soundscapes for a later piece called *Static Relief*.¹⁵ It was after intense listening to the "continuous, unbroken movement" of Tokyo's subway in the 1940s that he began to consider mixing "random noise" into his work:

In the dim lights of the subway, I was conscious only of the rhythm of the train and its physical effect on me. The regular rhythm of the train coursed through our bodies, pounded our perspiring skins; and I and the others in the subway leaned on this rhythm, receiving some kind of rest from it ... The train stopped at a station. Passengers entered and left. Then again in the fast-moving train people settled down, regaining that repose from the regular vibrations ... That rich world of sound around me ... those are the sounds that I should have the courage to let live within my music.¹⁶

In his sudden, social awareness of the affective qualities of ambient mechanical noise, Takemitsu "became aware that composing is giving meaning to that stream of sounds that penetrates the world we live in."¹⁷ Takemitsu's story of sensory immersion in the interior of the train—which tells of a profoundly social soundscape—anchors his long-term fascination with the musical value of noise in the feelings of humans contained in a technological environment. The train emits a shared, unbroken stream of sound as a felt vibration, in which noise is a natural part of the inhabited, "peopled" experience of the Japanese urban soundscape. Noise can be homey, warm, and profound: not just the "interruptive" character of sound, but the noisy but natural vibrations of human life in the city.

Endnotes

- 1 Lafcadio Hearn, "Insect Musicians," in *Exotics and Retrospectives* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1898) p. 63.
- 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).
- 7 Jonathan Sterne, "Sounds Like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space," *Ethnomusicology* (41) (Winter 1997): 22–50.
- 8 Yoshimura Hiroshi. Liner notes for Sarah Peebles' *108-Walking through Tokyo at the Turn of the Century* (Post-Concrete 004).
- 9 Rose Okugawa, Liner notes for *Japan: Its Sounds and People* (Capitol Records, 1966).
- 10 Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1985 [1925–26]) p. 82.
- 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 Hakaeriaeru 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"

Matthew Gandy

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.