

Sticky Idiosyncrasies: A Sound Anthropology of the Situation

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This site is sticky. Every site is sticky. Sites, and the situations they harbor and absorb, the situations tied to them, are not neutral and objective. They cannot be broken down seamlessly into clearly distinguishable components of a specific moment or an encounter or event. Percepts, the substances of perception, are intertwined and interlinked—and cannot be disentangled with a flick of the wrist. This *stickiness* is also what makes a site fascinating: it is its so-called *magic*, its *character*, its special mix of elements, its specificity. The mapped and measured site, the geometrically reconstructable, retrievable site, which is stored in many layers, is thus always also an experienceable space, physically present and audible.

In *this room, here and now*—where I am speaking for the first time today—few instances of stickiness come together for me. I did not know this site until now. Last night, at the opening, I heard my colleagues perform and speak: the voice of a friend whom I have known for perhaps some twenty years; or the voice of a scholar and author whose works I have read and know from reproductions in the media. I heard these sounds, as well as the situation- and site-specific activities of various other performers, some of whom are also familiar to me. Yet these so very recent sounds and listening experiences from yesterday do not necessarily linger on here in this exact space—but in my personal memory, which you may also share.

Otherwise, for me, there is no memory, no past encounter or listening experience attached to this site. But is that really the case? This is a modern, technically well-equipped *lecture hall*; comparable spaces are by no means unknown to me. While writing this talk, I continuously imagined the materials—textiles, plastics and metals—used in finishing the interior; the paints applied, their smells, textures and their reflective properties. I imagined the audience sitting in rows of seats like in a cinema, their distribution and density within the space—and what effect a fuller hall might have over a less full one on my listening experience. I tried to imagine the quality of the amplifiers, the microphones employed, and how they would be set up for this hall and the people speaking; the noise of the fans in the video projector, the computer and audio systems inside the space, and the air flowing in through the entrances and exits. I wondered how strong the hum of the speakers would be when they were on—the usual 49.99 to 50.01 hertz found in this country when no actual signal is being emitted?

I also imagined the general level of volume in this space. I imagined the kind of discussions that might precede my talk at this site; and which sounds, hypotheses and arguments, words of doubt and adamant pleas we might have already heard, at that other site, the previous evening. In what state we, as symposium participants, might find ourselves here: eager to argue or keen on consensus, or game for exploration and the pursuit of ideas? How calm would I be when I began my lecture? Could I expect vehement objections or nods of approval from my knowledgeable colleagues? Was it already clear which points of contention, broad areas of agreement, crucial taboos or recurring critiques would accompany us at this site?

At such moments, these kinds of feelings, perceptions, sensitivities, self-doubts and expectations enter into a listening experience—into my listening experience. The connections and conflicts, the expectations and fears that shimmer through also include some trace elements of stickiness—making me cling and hesitate right here and now.

Material Barbs

The situation in which I listen, in which you listen, is full of barbs and resistances: it is *not* immaterial. It smells and vibrates and has a specific density, a viscosity, a specific consistency—and, of no lesser importance, characteristic properties of resonance. The material of a situation enables me to have—or not to have—certain listening experiences.

Thus, listening to sounds is anything but an immaterial, incorporeal, disembodied, unconditional or even abstract experience. When I listen to sounds, I listen to them through the materiality of the areas that are their sound sources. I hear them through the amplifying or muffling ambient conditions, through on-site echo chambers and resonating bodies. These are the first and most comprehensive filters of all sound events.

When I describe listening to sounds in such material and physical terms, I am pursuing a materialism of sounds. It is only for about ten years now that this *sonic materialism* has been intensively discussed in relation to sound theory, anthropology and philosophy (Cox 2011, Voegelin 2012, Schulze 2020, pp. 30-34). The assumption that sounds are immaterial simply because they seem invisible has been dispelled over the course of historical efforts towards the embodiment of listening. What began at the latest in the nineteenth century with the history of physical acoustics and was pursued further in psychoacoustics, audiology and more recent studies on auditory cognition now also finds itself in accord with a phenomenology of the body and an anthropology of the senses: listening occurs *through*

things, people and their materiality. It is not an exclusively mental event, as contemporary cerebralism even in the twenty-first century still occasionally claims. You and I listen to each other through our bodies, the experiences we embody and bodily abilities. We are *bodies in sound*.

What you and I are listening to right now is not a disembodied event or a purely cognitive construction; it is an event that originates in the material around us and within us—and is also experienced materially by you and me. We listen to material events in a certain situation that consists of things, processes and resistances.

Thus, our respective auditory situation manifests itself first and foremost through its objects and materials, its fabrics and textures, apparatuses and architectures. Listening without material is utterly inconceivable. This is where listening finds its perceptive substance, its resistance, its *material barbs*.

At this very moment, here and now, this resistance is achieved primarily by mounting microphones, arranging loudspeakers and connecting amplifier systems; although also by the spatial volume of this site: it encloses us listeners and speakers in a characteristic acoustic situation—one in which we participate through every one of our actions in an acoustically effective manner. Each of us amplifies and modifies the resistance of this space. Yet these quite visible and purposely installed and calibrated devices are not the only materials affecting listening. Each of our bodies in its respective situational state has at least as great an effect. The material of my body and my sensorial pervasion of this body, my skill in perceiving situations, in assessing auditory sensations, my sense of and experience in transmitting my words, in uttering them and letting them reverberate, in inserting breaks in certain acoustic surroundings; in pausing to breathe and drink during my lecture, in my maintaining contact with you, the listeners, via looks, gestures, smiles and facial expressions, by modulating my voice—all these are means and practices of dealing on-site with spatial and situational resistance.

This resistance grows out of a *tension of attention* that you more or less show towards me. A performative tension of attention with which you, in fact, tangibly, affectively, perceptively transform, modulate and scale my perception, my sensorium, my experience of the material of this site and of this situation.

Thus, on the one hand, the barbs we get caught on, so to speak, consist of real material, solid existing devices, the objectlike dispositive of the things at a site, the aggregates and materials that surround, support and confront us there, that sometimes even stand in our way

or demand too much of us. On the other hand, it is also material events—albeit proprioceptive and interoceptive ones—that shape, envelope, as well as pervade you and me. The sensorium, the individual and greatly diverse situational and physical perception of sensory and sonic events is, at the very least, just as material as this floor on which I am standing, this microphone and loudspeaker that surround and amplify us, or the chairs and tables where we sit.

For the sensorium of our respective perceptual or operational practices is no less real or massive, but in part insurmountably strong in its effect on us, just as apparatuses and devices may also be. Many listeners know these moments, when past listening events, impressions of sounds and memories of experiences come to mind so strongly that they in part not only superimpose themselves on or form the backdrop for physically present sounds and listening experiences but can entirely determine and re-interpret them.

Hence, I may not even be able to have a new encounter or experience at a site I know well, since earlier memories keep haunting this site long afterwards (Holt 2019, Schulze 2020). I may also not be able to ascertain the quality of a new interpretation of a specific piece of music, as I had already become acquainted with it in an older interpretation. It can even happen that a totally new musical arrangement turns out to be unbearable for me—despite its contemporary style or performance situation—because through it a historical cause of colonial genocide emerges in all its violence and inescapability. In particular, the pure and presumably apolitical enjoyment of music, remote from everyday duties, relies entirely on affluence and resources, on outsourced labor and exploitation in faraway places, in other words: on the luxury which European colonial powers secured for themselves as of the seventeenth century for at least three centuries through land seizure, robbery and oppression. And yet, despite all this, I can listen to, appreciate and enjoy a sophisticated composition over and over again.

What I am listening to here and now is sonic physicality and memory in one: presence and experience tightly interwoven.

Stuck in Sound

At this very moment, I am stuck in certain sounds. I am stuck in sounds I have listened to and experienced physically and situationally in the past: these sounds have made my listening and your listening into what it is today. Your listening in a certain situation is always also a listening—or even a not-wanting-to-listen—to past situations and their sounds again.

Listening is biographical and historical. Life experience and history are stuck in, laminated on and amalgamated with my listening.

Remembered sounds and the effects they have on listeners cannot be turned on and off, dimmed, or ramped up at will. They also cannot be retrieved or registered at will, as if we were downloading or modifying some default settings. On the contrary, it often takes certain environmental conditions for a remembered situation, its materialities and interpretations, to force their way into the foreground again.

One technique developed for this purpose is what is called *sensory memory walking* or *sensobiographical walking*. Such research methods have been developed by Finnish colleagues over the past ten years—by Helmi Järviluoma and Noora Vikman from Tampere. They did so based on the practice of *soundwalking* developed by the sound artist Hildegard Westerkamp in the 1970s in Vancouver (Westerkamp 1974). To start with, soundwalking is an artistic and exploratory sensory practice: a method of probing sites aurally and sensorially—and subsequently bringing them to the attention of other listeners and sound walkers in order to point out characteristic auditory and sensorial aspects of experiencing a location. Biography and personal background experience play a rather minor role here; although sometimes they may be highlighted.

Precisely this memory of sound, this *auditory memory* takes center stage on sensory memory walks. During such walks—on the one hand, *at the site* that is to be historically investigated and, on the other hand, *in moving* through this site, also along historic routes and paths—the *auditory, situational and corporeal memory* is reactivated precisely by this movement. Only in exceptional cases can a spatially remote conversation—for instance in somebody else's office, one's own home or a public space—about experiences at a completely different site achieve great intensity and trigger compelling recollections. Conversely, by going to a specific site of memory or experience, the entire sensorium—the haptics, all odors, movements and dynamics, the kinesthetics, sounds and tastes at a site—suddenly stimulates me to recall even long-suppressed details and moments. Body memory is activated, and that which can hardly be archived and recounted linguistically is suddenly bodily present again.

Thus, Helmi Järviluoma and Noora Vikmann describe the effects of *sensory memory walking* as follows:

In the process of moving, it is possible to evaluate the borders of a territory acoustically: movement creates variation in listening points. The moving listener is also active in a different way, by making choices. The “freedom” to move provides

space to turn toward what could be called the acoustic magnets of an environment. [...] Listeners may also become conscious of their own sound making and consider their own needs, adapting to the environment. (Järviluoma & Vikman 2013, p. 654)

So it is the sensorial, spatial and affective mobility, the agility in the listening situation, that enables and emphasizes aspects of memory that receive less attention in other research or interview situations. It takes the possibility of movement, of a sudden turn, of research subjects articulating and surprising themselves outside the research format for more to come to light than merely the researchers' expectations or projections of their knowledge.

For memories of what we have listened to stick with us—even if we are unable to recognize them at every single moment or are unaware of how greatly they adhere to us. An activity is needed to help revive a situation- and action-related memory. However, no memory can be forced. What has been forgotten or suppressed cannot be nonchalantly conjured up again—it is rather the opposite. Although now and again, a longer, more relaxed and secure stay at a location where we once regularly spent time helps. Memories stored there are stirred up again—like bubbles of air rising to the surface of our thoughts and emotions. Memories come to us. Like a smile, tears or sleep.

The sounds of those situations stick with us. We carry them around with us, they are attached to us. As self-evident as this may seem, as far-reaching—and often ignored—are the repercussions that this may have for the perception and experience of sound. For the way we classify, experience, are repelled by or attracted to a sound is ultimately no longer in our hands. Using analytical and scholarly insight, we can try to distance ourselves from ourselves: in perceiving sounds, we can dismiss affects as accidental and irrelevant; we can focus our analyses entirely on historical, structural, technical and aesthetic issues. However, in doing all this—we are in essence evading *the situation of listening*.

By doing so, we are precisely *not* examining why certain sounds evoke this or that reaction; why they delight or repulse us, confuse or disappoint us. Hence, the affective value of sounds remains hidden or unrecognizable for us: indeed, for many it may even continue to seem insignificant.

All the same, these affects stick with us. They make us appear weak, dependent, submissive—yet this is exactly how we listen: even if such a viewpoint might be seen by some schools of research as undermining their implicit idea of human nature. We listen through the situation and the memories we have accumulated in it. (See: Biddle & Thompson 2013).

The Situation is the Interpreter

The situation in which we find ourselves here and now—together, yet with diverse past experiences, expectations, feelings of temporality and sensoria, not to mention the events and experiences of the most recent minutes, hours, weeks or months—this situation is what interprets the sounds we are listening to at this very moment differently for each of us.

With this approach, the seemingly objective meaning of a sound shifts to the actually experienceable and existent sensorium: to the sensibility and sensology of an actual person who experiences what is being listened to—who categorizes and connects their thoughts, actions and feelings to it, individually tuned in, even in discord. (Schulze 2018).

Against the backdrop of such an interpretive approach to how we listen to sounds, there is—radically speaking—*no longer objective sound perception*: no sound perception exists that might be independent of all those idiosyncrasies that stick with you, with me, with us—and are embodied in us.

Consequently, erratically vexing and tenacious bodily approaches to listening no longer seem like accidental aberrations—rather they become recognizable as the only truly authoritative ways to approach listening.

Thus, at best, every intersubjective interpretation of what we listen to is based on a set of idiosyncrasies that are considered generally accepted and acknowledged: common, predictable, respected. All the same, they remain idiosyncrasies.

Likes and dislikes, focuses and emphases shift historically, culturally, situationally and individually—and even after a short time or in a nearby culture are barely comprehensible without extra consideration and effort. How a person in the 1960s listened to the Beatles, a person in nineteenth century Paris listened to Richard Wagner, or your children experience your favorite TV show, or you and members of an audience experience a piece of music or a track that currently frames my life and daily routines—all this is for me now, for us today, for other listeners in other regions and eras almost completely unimaginable. For each of these listening modes performs its entirely idiosyncratic “movements within the labyrinth of categories, oppositions, and borders between presence and distance, thinking and not thinking, form and meaning” (Vikman & Järviluoma 2013, p. 655).

The idiosyncratic sensorial body listens: this situation—along with remanence and endless arbitrary details—activates this singular listening experience. Now.

Translated from the German by Catherine Kerkhoff-Saxon

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