



Aural Postcards

Sound, Memory and the City

Fran Tonkiss

Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and love-making, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep.

(Morrison 2001: 7)

Sound gives us the city as matter and as memory. In this register, the double life of cities – the way they slide between the material and the perceptual, the hard and the soft – is spoken out loud, made audible. The clamour, the density, the sheer weight of the modern city is heard as a machinic, constant and ‘general assault on the senses’ (Mumford 1961: 539). And then – listen – there is the way a city comes to us in memory and reverie, its cadences, whispers and sighs like the voices of sorrowful women. The Babel of the crowd and the wordless solitude of the individual in a noisy city capture in sound a larger urban tension between collective and subjective life. Sometimes it can be hard to hear anything, hard even to listen to one’s own thoughts, amongst all the noise.

Listening and not Listening in the City

More than one social theorist has been dazzled by the *spectacle* of the modern city. For Georg Simmel, urban experience was essentially and frenetically visual. And Walter Benjamin, who was shortsighted but finely tuned to sound, nevertheless remarked that urban sociality was

more a question of looking at than of listening to: 'Interpersonal relationships in big cities', he wrote, 'are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the activity of the ear' (Benjamin 1983: 38). The primacy these moderns give to the visual over the aural says something about the aesthetic quality of city life. As in the cinema when the sound tape doesn't come in and the reel unwinds silently, there is a thinness, a lightness, a kind of estrangement about seeing without sound. It offers surface without depth, appearance without resonance. Where the visual is action and spectacle, sound is atmosphere. But the modern city, for all that there is to see, is not only spectacular: it is sonic.

Cities provided a soundstage for the drama of modern life. As a heightened visual scene engaged the urban subject in new kinds of attention and distraction (Crary 2001), so logics of listening in the city came to be divided between the engineered and the accidental, between sound and noise (see Barry 2000). Modern auditory technologies – in architecture and design as well as in recording and broadcasting – served to marshal and discipline sound in space, from the muted interior of the office building to the total acoustics of the concert hall (Thompson 2002). These ways of attending to sound, whether in order to pacify, to purify or to amplify it, carved out acoustic order from the discordant rhythms of the city. Cities, after all, insist on the senses at the level of sound. It is easier and more effective to shut your eyes than it is to cover your ears. Ears cannot discriminate in the way eyes can – as with smell, hearing puts us in a submissive sensuous relation to the city. And yet still we glance at sounds in the city, we don't gaze. Individuals' relation to sound in the everyday spaces of the city tends to be one of distraction rather than attention. The exemplary urban attitude Simmel describes as '*blasé*' in this sense implies as much a dulling of sound as a dimming of vision. As a blank reaction to overstimulation, a narrowing or 'peculiar adjustment' of the senses (Simmel 1903: 179), the *blasé* posture inures the metropolitan to the hectic ambience of city life. It enacts at the subjective level a larger modern will to calm, to filter, to rationalize sound.

Acquired indifference is both the side-effect of and the best defence against 'too much indulgence in the nervous, metallic pleasure of cities' (Sontag 1982: 373). It is an attitude that flattens perception in the aural as in the visual realm; it gives us the fiction that people who speak to you on the street cannot be heard. Social deafness offers one kind of urban freedom – the lonely liberty of knowing that nobody is listening, no one likely to speak. In rendering technical what otherwise is simply learned, the mobile technologies of the personal stereo or telephone

realize this logic of separation and of indifference perfectly. They reverse the modern intent of the concert hall or public address system as means of organizing a collective 'culture of listening' (Thompson 2002). Immersed in a private soundscape, engaged in another interactive scene, you do not have to be in the city as a shared perceptual or social space. No one else can really know where you are. Yet such acute individualization also finds its expression in the renegade desire to stand out, to announce your presence, somehow to make yourself heard. For when nobody is listening, it can be hard for a person to stay within earshot of anyone, to 'remain audible even to himself' (Simmel 1903: 184).

Not listening in the city makes spaces smaller, tamer, more predictable. The pretence that you do not hear – a common conspiracy of silence – in this way is a response, passing as lack of response, to the modern city as a place of strangers. Some people, though, sound stranger than others; certain voices jar to certain other ears. The immigrant, it has been said, is *audible*, and indeed those forms of race thinking that cannot bring themselves to speak of skin often are happy to talk of language. Speaking the same language is always a first requirement of 'assimilation', but the city as polyglot soundscape is a space in which differences remain audible and translations incomplete. The modern city, in its confusion of tongues, bespeaks otherness. In its many accents we hear a more literal version of what Roland Barthes meant when he wrote of the city as that 'place where the other is and where we ourselves are other, as the place where we play the other' (Barthes 1997: 171).

Barthes had an ear for the city. Although semiotics might seem a stringently visual form of cultural analysis, Barthes' semiology of the urban unfolded space using a metaphor of language as sound, not simply as noiseless sign. For all his insistence that it should be seen as a kind of 'writing' or 'text', Barthes' city kept bursting into speech in ways that go beyond the mute language of architectural symbols. 'The city', he claimed, 'speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it' (Barthes 1997: 168). Walking the city, people invent their own urban idioms, a local language written in the streets and read as if out loud. A strange city, too, can seem like a language you don't know. Gradually you pick up a few words, recognize certain expressions, try out some turns of phrase. Walking, we compose spatial sentences that begin to make sense, come to master the intricate grammar of the streets; slowly, we learn to make the spaces of the city speak. Even laid out as a system of signs, cities won't rest quiet on the page – finally and vividly, the city for Barthes is a kind of poem that he wants 'to grasp and make sing' (Barthes 1997: 172).

Sound Souvenirs: Memory and the City

Walter Benjamin had that knack for making cities speak and sing. He souvenired sounds from different places, composed urban vignettes as if they were aural postcards. In Marseilles Benjamin tried to catch noises like butterflies in the empty streets up above the harbour – ‘in these deserted corners’, he wrote, ‘all sounds and things still have their silences’ (Benjamin 1928: 132). Amongst the travel souvenirs of other journeys, Benjamin brought back the ‘soundless tumult’ of the Alcazar in Seville and the bells of Freiburg Minster, still ringing in his ears in the echo of memory. It was this latter that led him to consider how

The special sense of a town is formed in part for its inhabitants – and perhaps even in the memory of the traveller who has stayed there – by the timbre and intervals with which its tower-clocks begin to chime. (Benjamin 1925–6: 82)

The special sense of a city maybe no longer is given by tower-clocks and church-bells – by sounds, that is, which tell time – but rather by those that tell of motion. The peculiar sounds of transit are the signature tunes of modern cities. These are sounds that remind us the city is a sort of machine. The diesel stammer of London taxis, the wheeze of its buses. The clatter of the Melbourne tram. The two-stroke sputter of Rome. The note that sounds as the doors shut on the Paris metro, and the flick, flick, flick of the handles. The many sirens of different cities.

Such sounds are kept as souvenirs. In Paris one summer, in an apartment near the Gare de Lyon, I would go to sleep to the scrapes and the slides of the rollerbladers on the concourse outside the station, and to the low noise of late trains coming in, going out, heading south. In Sydney, another summer and living under the flightpath, I was woken each morning by the first plane of the day down from Singapore (sound telling time again, more reliable than a cheap alarm clock and louder than Freiburg Minster). Sounds can deceive and displace, too – or at least can open out spaces to imaginative translations. A friend in London tells me that when he cycles through Soho in the early morning and hears the sound of church bells, it makes him think he is in Italy.

In these ways, sound threads itself through the memory of place. When, in the summer of 1949, E.B. White returned to New York as if to an old love affair, the sounds of the city were as evocative as somebody’s remembered smell. As he orients himself again to familiar streets,

it is sound that gives up the feel of the city. The heat of July is there in the murmur of electric fans, the passage of a politician in the scream of a siren. And there are silences that mark what has gone: the elevated railway has just about disappeared and he ‘misses the sound . . . the tremor of the thing’ (White 1999: 48). Sound here works through metonym, aural fragments that speak of something larger. White knows that New York is a great port city, for example, even if the only boat he sees during his stay is a little sloop on the East River. He hears ‘the *Queen Mary* blow one midnight, though, and the sound carried the whole history of departure and longing and loss’ (White 1999: 23).

This relation of sound to memory is audibly present in the moment of ‘recall’, the melding of space, sound and memory there in the concept of ‘resonance’: a movement in the air like sound you can touch. Benjamin – still myopic, still highly tuned – writes in his *Berlin Chronicle* that

The *deja vu* effect has often been described. But I wonder whether the term is actually well chosen, and whether the appropriate metaphor to the process would not be far better taken from the realm of acoustics. One ought to speak of events that reach us like an echo awakened by a call, a sound that seems to have been heard somewhere in the darkness of past life. (Benjamin 1932: 59)

Such sound memories make us what Elias Canetti has called an ‘ear-witness’ to the scene. Canetti would have agreed with Benjamin’s proposition – said of Kafka, whom both men admired – that ‘He who listens hard doesn’t see.’ Hearing has its own relation to truth: to testimony, to spoken evidence, to placing trust in words rather than in images, to accepting things that are promised, even if they cannot be shown. Hearing likewise involves a special relationship to remembering. It might, as Benjamin says, be the sense of memory. The past comes to us in its most unbidden, immediate and sensuous forms not in the artifice of the travel photograph, but in the accident of sounds half-remembered. This is something like the difference between record and memory. There is a quality in those sounds not quite recalled that has the texture and the delicacy of memory itself. What music was playing, on that day, in that place? Do you remember where you were, when you heard the news? What words did she say, exactly, the last time I saw her? It might be less affecting if we had telescopes and cameras for the ears, if we could amplify and capture the echo and shudder of memory, if we took and kept our passing snapshots of sound.

The Silences of Cities

In the deserted corners of a city like Marseilles, Benjamin had said, 'all sounds and things still have their silences.' But how do we hear silence in the city, how is it that silence sounds *different* when we listen for it in cities? Somehow it is not the same as the deep 'soundlessness of the suburbs' (Self 1999: 118), but more provisional, chancier, kind of illicit. Stumbling across silence in the city – a quiet quarter, a lull in the traffic – can be like uncovering a secret. If music, as Adorno had it, is 'an art of time', so silence has the art of keeping time still. A minute's silence, after all, reminds you how slowly even the shortest time can pass. But while some forms of silence contain their sense of the timeless, the silences of cities seem precarious, as if only for the time being. It is a silence that is always about to be broken, or left behind. Think of the peculiar quiet of Sunday morning in the heart of a city like London. The place is stilled, gathered together, holding its breath.

Peter Ackroyd has written of the 'teeming' silence of London, a silence that shivers with the absence of all the people somewhere else, all the noise just out of earshot. And in these fragile spaces there invariably remains the incidental music of urban life: the low grumble of traffic, the drip of water somewhere, 'all the little noises that live inside the silences of the city' (Auster 1998: 279). If every sound and everything in the city has its silence, so silence gains its quality from a larger geography of sound. Empty space that doesn't talk back is as evocative as the hush that falls over the crowd, the telephone that doesn't ring, the dog that doesn't bark. A blasé manner of being in the city may lead you to not listen, but soundlessness – those moments in those places when the city stops speaking – can be strangely arresting. Quiet spaces are the weird negative of others making noise, where silence has stolen away and enclosed itself in place. Mostly, though, even in muted hours, there is the background murmur of the city talking to itself. Sometimes singing, perhaps, under its breath. Night comes to the city not only with the lights going out, but with the sound going down. It never turns off, it is just that some things – the cadence of night voices, distant traffic – grow louder in the mix. Still, late at night the quiet creeps in and it is as though you hear the city sleep. It can make you dream tall.

References

- Ackroyd, P. (2000), *London: A Biography*, London: Chatto & Windus.
 Auster, P. (1998), 'Appendix 3: Squeeze Play, by "Paul Benjamin"', in *Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure*, New York: Henry Holt & Co.

- Barry, A. (2000), 'Noise', in S. Pile and N. Thrift (eds), *City A–Z*, London: Routledge.
 Barthes, R. (1997) 'Semiology and the Urban', in N. Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture*, London: Routledge.
 Benjamin, W. (1925–6) 'One Way Street', in (1985), *One Way Street and Other Writings*, London: Verso, pp. 45–104.
 — (1928), 'Marseilles', in P. Demetz (ed.) (1986), *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, New York: Schocken, pp. 131–6.
 — (1932), 'A Berlin Chronicle' in P. Demetz (ed.) (1986), *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, New York: Schocken, pp. 3–60.
 — (1983), *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, Harry Zohn (trans.), London: Verso.
 Crary, J. (2001), *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
 Morrison, T. (2001), *Jazz*, London: Vintage.
 Mumford, L. (1961), *The City in History: Its Origins, its Transformations and its Prospects*, London: Penguin.
 Self, W. (1999), 'Big Dome', in *London: The Lives of the City*. Granta 65 (Spring): 116–25.
 Simmel, G. (1903), 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (eds) (1997), *Simmel on Culture*, London: Sage, pp. 174–85.
 Sontag, S. (1978), 'Unguided Tour', in (1982) *A Susan Sontag Reader*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
 Thompson, E. (2002), *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
 White, E.B. (1999), *Here is New York*, New York: The Little Bookroom.