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Helmi Järviluoma

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Re-sounding Pleasure in Soundscape Studies

Helmi Järviluoma

Abstract

In this article I explore the idea of gaining pleasure from environmental sounds by deploying two concepts: *pleasure* and *small agency*. One of the key positions taken by soundscape studies has been referred to in rather vague terms as 'a positive approach.' Here, I suggest that there is a need to reconsider what it is that this positivity actually refers to. I will present some examples from two major research projects that I have led during the past ten years: first, *One Hundred Finnish Soundscapes* (see, for instance, Järviluoma et al., 2006); and second, *Acoustic Environments in Change* (Järviluoma et al., 2009). Throughout the paper, I discuss the idea of pleasure in soundscape studies – or playfully speaking, 're-sound' – tossing it back and forth.

Sonic pleasure as the driver of everyday life

A Finnish manual workman, Aimo, describes the moment he first heard the *schlager*-tune "Domino"[1] as a young man, in the year 1952 (Järviluoma, 2006).[2] He heard the famous alto voice of Maire Ojonen one day when he was leaving for work, running down the attic stairs at his parents' house:

[1] Composed in 1951 by Louis Ferrari, the original French lyrics were written by Jacques Plante.

[2] All the translations from Finnish primary research materials are mine.

> There was something that went straight to my heart, at least it exceeded the average where my feelings are concerned. The name of the *schlager* was "Domino." I stopped on an attic step. I stood there, without making the slightest movement, taking in Ojonen's interpretation with all my senses. Sheltered by the atmosphere it created, I would be able to work really hard that day, and there would still be some of that atmosphere left for the days to come. I knew it immediately; it would be the inner, everyday soundscape of this boy for a long time. (Järviluoma, 2006, p. XX)

Aimo was standing as still as a statue – externally, nothing appeared to be happening – but the internal processes were there. Even a small act or action on the world can be meaningful (Jokinen, 2005, p. 31), as we can read from Aimo's use of Ojonen's interpretation of "Domino." Such a reading might begin with what I describe as 'small agency.' According to Lois McNay (2004), *agency* can act as a 'mediating concept' through which it is possible to analyze the articulations between everyday experiences and social structures (p. 20). The concept of small agency has subsequently been developed by the Finnish anthropologist Marja-Liisa Honkasalo: it refers to everyday agency with minimal observable contours. Here we are dealing with small, modest ways of acting and knowing (Honkasalo, 2008b, p. 498). Sociologist Eeva Jokinen has framed what is basically the same thing using the concept *everyday agency*, when a subject living her or his life is moulding the everyday into a livable form through small acts. At the same time, of course, people have to relate their actions to the already existing layers of world (Jokinen, 2005, p. 31; Åkerblad, 2011, p. 21).

According to Honkasalo (2004), the concept of small, or minimal, agency stems from pragmatist and social constructivist frameworks that give repetition and *habit* a crucial weight (Peirce, 1976; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; see also, de Certeau, 1984). It is particularly easy to link the term to soundscape studies, since ethnomethodologically inclined studies of sounds and everyday life have been influential both for us Finnish soundscape researchers (Järviluoma et al., 2009) and for the French Laboratory CRESSON's (Centre de recherche sur l'espace sonore et l'environnement urbain) dynamic approach to atmospheres in urban life (see, for instance, Thibaud, 2004, pp. 148-149; Tixier, 2004, pp. 115-123).

Aimo's narrative comes from the data collected during the research project *One Hundred Finnish Soundscapes*.[3] This is an example of a study involving the gathering of primarily written descriptions of sonic pleasures, compiled through a writing competition that solicited suggestions for those soundscapes considered most important within the geographical borders of Finland. *One Hundred Finnish Soundscapes* was a three-year research program (2003-2006), organized and conducted by the Finnish Society for Acoustic Ecology in collaboration with five universities, the Finnish Literature Society, the Sibelius Museum, the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) with the support of The Finnish Cultural Foundation, and Svenska Kulturfonden. The final one hundred soundscapes were selected by jury from 762 written suggestions.

[3] See for example Järviluoma et al., 2006; http://100aanimaisemaa.mediaedge.info.

In many submissions received it is possible to find examples of small agency in everyday life, that which "gives pleasure the right kind of place within one's life" (Russell, 2005, p. 11); here, pleasure clearly means 'pleasure,' rather than thrill or *jouissance*. Another common feature of the submissions is how people weave into their lengthy stories both the sounds of music and other environmental sounds, without making a significant distinction between the two.

We could devote a great deal of time debating whether or not 'agency,' albeit small, is the right word to describe this space of modalities in which Aimo found himself over fifty years ago. This was before the time of walkmans or iPods. Aimo had to lodge the pleasurable music and other sounds that he heard in his *memory*, where they worked like a 'small agency battery' for many days to come. To apply Tia DeNora's (2000) framework, one can say that music serves to organize its users as it is replayed in memory (p. 7).

Moreover, music hit Aimo *unaware*, suddenly, when he was descending stairs on his way to work: "At times, actors may engage in this appropriation process with deliberation, knowing how certain music works on them from past experience. But at other times, music may take actors unaware" (DeNora, 2000, p. 162). For Aimo, it was the latter that happened. He did not fall into an *earwormhole* (Goodman, 2010, p. 147); instead, a useful concept here could be Henri Lefebvre's 'moment':

> The theory of moments, then, is not situated outside of everydayness, but would be articulated along with it, by uniting with critique to introduce therein what its richness lacks. It would thus tend, at the core of pleasure

> linked to the totality, to go beyond the old oppositions of lightness and heaviness, of seriousness and the lack of seriousness. (Lefebvre, cited in Situationist International Editors, 1960, p. 10)

Moments make people alive, connect them to each other and to their history (Lefebvre, 1971; see also Shields, 2002b; Jokinen, 2010). Moments can be the drivers, the prime movers, in everyday life (Jokinen, 2010), as was the case for Aimo's moment after hearing "Domino" for the first time.

Indeed, Aimo's moment is not situated outside everydayness: "Each activity is simultaneously an opportunity for alienation and for dis-alienation" (Shields, 2002a, p. 70). Similarly, small agency goes beyond such old oppositions (Honkasalo, 2004, pp. 80-81). In the above cited narrative written by Aimo, it is important to notice the linkages between the special moment, the new and unexpected sonic experience, and the repetition, the work. Honkasalo argues that small agency includes an element of *the new* that is left under-theorized by both Peirce and Berger and Luckmann. Agency creates bonds and relations – it can give birth to something new, unexpected. "Domino" is something new for Aimo; it appears to him like a miracle, and even if it only ensures that he maintains a grip on his everyday life, it hints at the possibility of choice or agency.

Emotion and understanding in pleasure

> I have had, you see, to resort more and more to very small, almost invisible pleasures, little extras… You've no idea how great one becomes with these little details, it's incredible how one grows. (Gombrowicz, 2005 [1965])

My second case study comes from the project *Acoustic Environments in Change*, in which a group of Finnish ethnographers studied the changing soundscapes of six European villages in collaboration with an international, multidisciplinary project group and consultants from each country that was studied.[4] Five of the villages were the same as in the 'Five Village Soundscapes' (FVS) studied in the World Soundscape Project in 1975.

There is not the space here to summarize the whole project, but I wish to stress that we did *not* replicate the earlier World Soundscape Project. Each researcher had his or her own new research questions. However, there were some methods that we, to some extent, borrowed from the earlier project. One of these was that we again enlisted the co-operation of the village schools, conducting similar 'sound preference tests' as in 1975, in which young people were asked to list five sounds they found pleasant and five sounds that they found unpleasant in their own environments. We also spoke with the children, asking them to write sound diaries, and we conducted sound exercises with them.

[4] The final book, *Acoustic Environments in Change* (eds. Järviluoma, Kytö, Truax, Uimonen, Vikman), was published in June 2009 in collaboration with Simon Fraser University.

For this discussion I wish to raise one interesting, and somewhat more theoretical, question about the nature of pleasure and sonic preference testing.[5] According to Daniel Russell (2005), for Plato, the goodness of pleasure is 'situated' – it depends on the goodness with which intelligent agency gives pleasure the right kind of place within one's life (p. 11). So far so good. But now, we must take into consideration the fact that in our sonic preference tests we were dealing with children, mostly from 8 to 12 years old, and only occasionally up to 16 years old. Thus, while the children and youngsters were at different stages of the 'civilizing process,' they were definitely not adults. This is, after all, a crucial point when we think about the fact – and now I am borrowing from Harvie Ferguson (1990) – that ever since the Renaissance, the child, the 'lunatic', and the 'savage' have posed a problem for the 'Rational Man' in that *they don't act as they should*.

Ferguson has studied closely the change over time in relation to the 'freedom of play' that children have been allowed on the one hand, and the 'necessity of work' on the other (1990, p. 15). We conducted the sonic preference tests in the school environment, which for Ferguson is more characteristic of the latter: a place where the child is being civilized, learning the sanctioned order. The school environment can be read and heard in many ways in the test results. But there is the other aspect as well – 'freedom of play' – and I would say that it was more evident than the 'necessity of work' in recent test

[5] The analysis and interpretation of the sonic preference tests can be found in the final chapter of the book (Järviluoma et al., 2009, pp. 226-250).

results, for instance, in the findings from the Scottish village of Dollar in 2000 versus 1975, summarized in the table below.

TABLE 1. SONIC PREFERENCES IN DOLLAR IN 1975 AND IN 2000. (Modified from Järviluoma et al 2009, 234.)

Dollar: Most Pleasant Sounds

		1975	2000	1975	2000	Examples
birds		19	11	26%	14%	
the Dollar burn		13	6	18%	8%	
rustling leaves		13	6	18%	8%	
water		10	1	14%	1%	
clinking coins		8	0	11%	0%	
rain		5	0	7%	0%	
wind		5	6	7%	8%	
other			49		62%	
of which:	*signals*		6		8%	*school bell marking the endof the day (6)*
	human voices		9		11%	*laughing (4), teacher´s laughing voice (2)*
	music		5		6%	
	nature		5		6%	*silence (2)*
	objects and action		7		9%	*Jumping on a trampoline, drinking lemonade, eating candies*
	technology, media		13		16%	*TV (4), cars/engines (4), radio (5)*
	animals		4		5%	*cat purring (3), sheep (1)*
Answers total		**73**	**79**	**100%**	**100%**	

Let us consider a small detail at the bottom of Table 1: children in Dollar find 'sonic pleasure' in jumping on the trampoline, drinking lemonade, and eating candies. Michel Serres refers to the trampoline in the final chapter of his *Les cinq sens* (1998) as a candidate for the sixth or common sense: the sense of bodily joy, or ecstasy. The body, so to speak, becomes itself in playing with itself: "Here, Serres evokes astonishingly the seraphic pleasures of self-exceeding, to be found, for example, in the pleasures of swimming, of running, in the human fascination with the trampoline, or in the playing of rugby" (Connor, 2005, p. 329). Serres is one of the proponents of the 'sensory

revolution' in both philosophy and anthropology, where he attempts to bring senses, and the materiality of the body, into the centre of scholarly focus.

When thinking through the materiality of the body in relation to pleasure, one common conclusion among philosophers recalls the one given by the Oxford scholar Christopher Butler (2004): "I shall argue in what follows that our pleasurable feelings and emotions are in fact very complicated modes of understanding the world, and that it is a combination of feeling and understanding which gives us pleasure" (p. xviii). Butler detaches himself firmly from the *docere cum delectare* (teach while pleasing) notion of pleasure; rather, he stresses the *interactive* relationships between emotion and understanding in pleasure. According to him, this is what we should seek to understand.

Soundscape studies – docere cum delectare or not?

From the very beginning of soundscape studies (Schafer, 1968), one of its key ideas was its positive approach, as compared to the negative tendencies of noise studies. According to the most common origin narrative, the beginnings of the field can be traced to Vancouver in the late 1960s, where R. Murray Schafer was teaching at the new communications department at Simon Fraser University. Some environmental philosophers have come to a very similar conclusion as Schafer's (for example, Lähde, 2000): if people receive too much negative information they don't even try to act – quite the contrary. In a way, the connection here, again, is small agency. If we trust that even the smallest acts can have an effect on the state of environment – in this case, the

acoustic environment – it is possible for us to feel empowered, to feel that we can mould the everyday sonic environment to be livable.

Clearly, there are certain elements in acoustic ecology or soundscape studies that give a hint of its nature as a social movement. One of the key aims of acoustic ecologists has been, in one way or another, to raise the level of consciousness about acoustic environments. That is to say, that we draw attention to the pleasurable, and also useful, aspects of soundscapes in order to understand more, to raise consciousness. Does this, then, necessarily mean, *docere cum delectare*? Or just helping ourselves and others to realize the *interactive* relationships between emotion and understanding in pleasure?

When writing this article, I suddenly found myself in the midst of big questions that actually have to do not only with soundscape studies, but popular music studies as well. For example, Roland Barthes (1975) concluded that deciding whether pleasure and *jouissance* are the same or parallel phenomena is crucial:

> Is pleasure only a minor bliss? Is bliss nothing but extreme pleasure? Is pleasure only a weakened, conformist bliss—a bliss deflected through a pattern of conciliations? Is bliss merely a brutal, immediate (without mediation) pleasure? On the answer (yes or no) depends the way in which we shall write the history of our modernity. (p. 20)

There are also more modest implications of this division. Does the fact that acoustic ecology makes people more conscious of their own acoustic environments also necessarily mean that the people will be more 'healthy' and 'whole' when their

unconscious ideas are 'raised' to the level of consciousness? Or is this just the kind of rhetoric we nowadays hear throughout the world of universities, in humanities and social sciences; that is, that we do not have any worth unless our work can be directly useful and promote well-being and health? I have no answers, and in fact I doubt that there are any final answers. It is more important, I believe, simply to ask these questions.

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