CALL FOR PAPERS

From the Street to the Museum:
Silence and Sound from the Middle Ages to Today

Thursday and Friday, November 15th and 16th, 2012
at the Université de Versailles-St-Quentin-en-Yvelines

Conference under the aegis of
Labex PATRIMA
supported by
CHCSC & ESR (UVSQ)
MRTE (Université de Cergy-Pontoise)
LéAV (ENSAV – École nationale supérieure d’architecture de Versailles)
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Jingles, music listened to through private earphones insulating us from the surrounding world, complaints from inhabitants new to the countryside about the noise of the cock crowing in the morning or the chiming of bells – sounds are part of our daily life, but our perception of them is intimately related to the society in which we live. Noises, sounds, and silences have long helped to create a shared sense of sociability, and numerous researchers now study the acoustic environment or signature of different areas of the city. Architects and urbanists were the first to broach the issue of “soundscapes”; these were theorized by the Canadian composer R. Murray Shafer, followed by geographers, acousticians, and acoustic artists who offer analyses of spaces as they are experienced.

Geographers, legal experts, medical doctors, architects, urbanists, historians and literary scholars may now confer on this subject, whose recent emergence in the field of environmental history converges with thinking about the perception of various pollutions in the modern and contemporary worlds.

Yet the sound culture of today is not the only place of experimentation with the perception and diffusion of sounds. The Middle Ages and the early modern world, in which orality played a key role, were sensitive to noises and silences and accorded great importance to the voice, even in jurisprudence, as Lucien Febv by reminds us in his analysis of the world of Rabelais. Arlette Farge, for example, points out the importance of voices to our knowledge of the early modern world, voices difficult for the historian to recover from a time before sound-recording, but which still speak to us through private diaries, local newspapers recalling the acoustic environment of brawls, and, of course, legal archives full of transcriptions of these outcries. Using their different methodologies, historians and ethnologists can thus legitimately aim to “reconstruct the acoustic environments of

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1 See the website ecouterparis.net created by l’Atelier du bruit.
3 See Géocarrefour, 78/2 (2003) for the special issue on La ville, le bruit et le son edited by C. Montès.
4 See the publications of the research center CRESSON in Grenoble.
5 On these environmental issues, see G. Massard-Guilbaud, Histoire de la pollution industrielle (Paris: EHESS, 2010) and the Histecologia network (http://histecologia.net).
7 A. Farge, Pour une histoire des voix au 18e siècle (Paris : Le Seuil, 2010).
the past,” to investigate the nature and perception of sounds according to different time periods and places. Linguists, for their part, concentrate on the “lexicalization” of the acoustic environment, and literary scholars investigate the translation into writing of acoustic perceptions and the sameness or difference of these.9

The question of the “trace of sound” reveals a changing approach to cultural history. Early periods used writing to describe untimely and outlawed sounds or to indicate the primordial place in the perceptible world assigned to speech and hearing, for instance by recording oral testimonies during the Black Plague. Manuscript illumination can also represent an acoustic environment (not an erudite, codified music), just as can early medieval indications of musical sounds prior to the invention of the codes for musical notation used still today. Figuratively or literally, literature represents harmony, dissonance, noise. Likewise, mechanical sound-recording has an interesting history. (Commercial recordings of music will be set aside.) Ethnologists’ use of recordings of acoustic environments in their early studies and the widespread use today of sound-recordings in the study of contemporary societies pose questions concerning the conservation and status of such recordings. Like images, which we know can lie, sounds have become a way of embellishing a postcard, a publicity campaign, or an urban area, without our knowing their source.

The contemporary city is also the field upon which a “battle of sounds” is played out. Street vendors, buffoons, and acrobats have vanished from the Boulevard du Crime, and the reign of quiet seems to have been established, to the point where Paris, City of Light, has become a city that sleeps. Occasional events such as Paris’s annual “Sleepless night” (Nuit blanche) and spectacular initiatives such as the Pierrrots de la Nuit, “brigades of players engaged in artistic nocturnal interventions” intended to “arouse, but not wake people up,” bear witness to the conflict between silence and sound. Experiences are numerous; it would thus be useful to investigate the duality of “quiet” and “resounding” (calme and sonore) and to consider the many meanings that inhabitants, in particular, assign to these adjectives and the importance given to fighting against contemporary urban noise.

The materiality of orality and sound has been accepted as a reality since at least the nineteenth century, and yet few researchers raise questions about the current patrimonialization of these sounds and acoustic images, which have become veritable acoustic identities for some people. Many fields are involved in this patrimonialization and valorization; we might even think of the acoustic wrapping of documentary films, radio programs, or even television reality shows, in which the sentimental, repetitive music of the moment, distilled in small doses, but identical from one channel to another, signals to the viewer the genre of the television show and serves as an identity marker.

Bringing together researchers from different horizons (literary scholars, linguists, historians, architects, geographers, acousticians, and acoustic practitioners), the conference “Silence and Sound from the Middle Ages to Today” proposes to gather contributions from all perspectives on the following topics:

- the history, perception, expression and measurement of acoustic environments
- acoustic identities. How are they created, these identities recognizable at the first few sounds? How are they preserved and established as a genuine acoustic heritage (on the scale of a business enterprise, a radio or television program, or on that of a neighborhood or a city)?

9 See, for example, J.-M. Fritz, La cloche et la lyre : Pour une poétique médiévale du paysage sonore (Geneva: Droz, 2011).
the preservation and mapping of acoustic landscapes, both ancient and contemporary. With respect to the identification of sounds, the role of transcribing and re-creating sounds may also need further exploration.

• representations of civic music (for example, on the occasion of urban festivities or charivaris) and acoustic transcriptions
• the indexing and diffusion of acoustic environments since the creation of sound recordings. What should be the heritage policy with respect to these, and what are the stakes for contemporary society?
• the use of acoustic methodologies in social and historical investigations
• representations and evocations of sonorous scenes in literature and the arts. This also involves investigating literature as a kind of transcription of an acoustic identity. Does sound also indicate different schools of thought (for romantics, a love of “rumor”; for realists, a transcription of the noisy city; for symbolists, the search for musical harmony?)

Paper proposals (comprised of a title and a 300-word synopsis) should be sent to delarueaumusee@gmail.com. The deadline for receiving these is September 1st, 2012. Proposals should be accompanied by a brief presentation of the author and his or her institutional affiliation. Assisted by members of the advisory committee of experts currently being constituted, the conference organizers will examine all paper proposals and get in touch with the authors by mid-September.

Advisory committee:

Juliette Aubrun, historian, CHCSC (UVSQ)
Maria Basile, architect, MRTE (UCP)
Catherine Bruant, architectural historian, LéAV (ENSAV)
Christian Delporte, historian, CHCSC (UVSQ)
Corinne François-Denève, literary scholar (UVSQ)
Anne Hertzog, geographer, MRTE (UCP)
Laura Kendrick, medievalist, ESR (UVSQ)
Catherine Lavandier, acoustician, MRTE (UCP)
Julien Longhi, linguist, CRTF (UCP)
Damien Masson, urbanist, MRT (UCP)
Nathalie Simonnet, architectural historian, LéAV (ENSAV)
Jean-Claude Yon, historian, CHCSC (UVSQ)

Conference organizers:

Juliette Aubrun, contemporary French history, CHCSC (UVSQ)
Pauline Delaitre, doctoral student in acoustics, MRTE (UCP)
Cédric Fériel, doctoral student in the history of architecture (ENSAV-UVSQ)
Corinne François-Denève, 19th and 20th century French literature, CHCSC (UVSQ)
Catherine Lavandier, acoustics, MRTE (UCP)
Damien Masson, urban studies, MRT (UCP)
Nathalie Simonnot, architectural history, LéAV (ENSAV)