

Against Soundscape

I very much welcome the recent explosion of interest in sound, the impact of which is being felt not only in my own discipline of anthropology, but also in the related fields of art, architecture and archaeology, to name just a few. But I am also concerned lest we repeat mistakes that have already befallen studies in visual culture. The 'visual', in these studies, appears to have nothing to do with what it means to be able to see. That is to say, it scarcely deals with the phenomenon of light. It is rather about the relations between objects, images and their interpretations. A study of aural culture, built along the same lines, would be about the interpretation of a world of things rendered in their acoustic forms. It has become conventional to describe such a world by means of the concept of soundscape. Undoubtedly when it was first introduced, the concept served a useful rhetorical purpose in drawing attention to a sensory register that had been neglected relative to sight. I believe however that it has now outlived its usefulness. More to the point, it carries the risk that we might lose touch with sound in just the same way that visual studies have lost touch with light. In what follows I will set out four reasons why I think the concept of soundscape would be better abandoned.

First, the environment that we experience, know and move around in is not sliced up along the lines of the sensory pathways by which we enter into it. The world we perceive is the *same* world, whatever path we take, and each of us perceives it as an undivided centre of activity and awareness. For this reason I deplore the fashion for multiplying – *scapes* of every possible kind. The power of the prototypical concept of landscape lies precisely in the fact that it is not tied to any specific sensory register – whether vision, hearing, touch, smell or whatever. In ordinary perceptual practice these registers cooperate so closely, and with such overlap of function, that their respective contributions are impossible to tease apart. The landscape is of course *visible*, but it only becomes *visual* when it has been rendered by some technique, such as of painting or photography, which then allows it to be viewed indirectly, by way of the resulting image which, as it were, returns the landscape back to the viewer in an artificially purified form, shorn of all other sensory dimensions. Likewise, a landscape may be *audible*, but to be *aural* it would have to have been first rendered by a technique of sound art or recording, such that it can be *played back* within an environment (such as a darkened room) in which we are otherwise deprived of sensory stimulus.

We should not be fooled by art historians and other students of visual culture who write books about the history of seeing that are entirely about the contemplation of images. Their conceit is to imagine that the eyes are not so much organs of observation as instruments of playback, lodged in the image rather than the body of the observer. It is as though the eyes did our seeing for us, leaving us to (re)view the images they relay to our consciousness. For the active looking and watching that people do as they go about their business, visual theorists have substituted regimes of the 'scopic', defined and distinguished by the recording and playback functions of these allegorical eyes. Although the apparent etymological kinship between the scopic and the 'scapes' of our perception is spurious ('scape' is actually derived from the Dutch *schap*, cognate with the English suffix '-ship', referring to a fellowship or community of persons with a commonality of land, law and custom), such a connection is commonly presumed. Thus in resorting to the notion of soundscape, we run the risk of subjecting the ears, in studies of the aural, to the same fate as the eyes in visual studies. This is my second objection to the concept. We need to

avoid the trap, analogous to thinking that the power of sight inheres in images, of supposing that the power of hearing inheres in recordings. For the ears, just like the eyes, are organs of observation, not instruments of playback. Just as we use our eyes to watch and look, so we use our ears to listen as we go forth in the world.

It is of course to light, and not to vision, that sound should be compared. The fact however that sound is so often and apparently unproblematically compared to *sight* rather than light reveals much about our implicit assumptions regarding vision and hearing, which rest on the curious idea that the eyes are screens which let no light through, leaving us to reconstruct the world inside our heads, whereas the ears are holes in the skull which let the sound right in so that it can mingle with the soul. One result of this idea is that the vast psychological literature on optical illusions is unmatched by anything on the deceptions of the ear. Another, that I have already noted, is that studies of visual perception have had virtually nothing to say about the phenomenon of light. It would be unfortunate if studies of auditory perception were to follow suit, and to lose touch with sound just as visual studies have lost touch with light. Far better, by placing the phenomenon of sound at the heart of our inquiries, we might be able to point to parallel ways in which light could be restored to the central place it deserves in understanding visual perception. To do this, however, we have first to address the awkward question: what *is* sound? This question is a version of the old philosophical conundrum: does the tree falling in a storm make any sound if there is no creature present with ears to hear it? Does sound consist of vibrations in the medium? Or is it something we register inside our heads? Is it a phenomenon of the material world or of the mind? Is it 'out there' or 'in here'? Can we dream it?

It seems to me that such questions are wrongly posed, in so far as they set up a rigid division between two worlds, of mind and matter – a division that is reproduced every time that appeal is made to the *materiality* of sound. Sound, in my view, is neither mental nor material, but a phenomenon of *experience* – that is, of our immersion in, and commingling with, the world in which we find ourselves. Such immersion, as the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) insisted, is an existential precondition for the isolation both of minds to perceive and of things in the world to be perceived. To put it another way, sound is simply another way of saying 'I can hear'. In just the same way, light is another way of saying 'I can see'. If this is so, then neither sound nor light, strictly speaking, can be an *object* of our perception. Sound is not *what* we hear, any more than light is what we see. Herein lies my third objection to the concept of soundscape. It does not make sense for the same reason that a concept of 'lightscape' would not make sense. The scaping of things – that is, their surface conformation – is revealed to us thanks to their illumination. When we look around on a fine day, we see a landscape bathed in sunlight, not a lightscape. Likewise, listening to our surroundings, we do not hear a soundscape. For sound, I would argue, is not the object but the medium of our perception. It is what we hear *in*. Similarly, we do not see light but see *in* it (Ingold 2000: 265).

Once light and sound are understood in these terms, it becomes immediately apparent that in our ordinary experience, the two are so closely involved with one another as to be virtually inseparable. This involvement, however, raises interesting questions that we are only beginning to address. How, for example, does the contrast between light and darkness compare with that between sound and silence? It is fairly obvious that the experience of sound is quite different in the dark than in the light. Does the experience of light likewise depend on whether we are simultaneously drowned in sound or cocooned in silence? These kinds of questions bring me to my fourth objection to the concept of soundscape. Since it is modelled on the concept of landscape, soundscape places the emphasis on the *surfaces* of the world in which we live. Sound and light, however, are infusions of the *medium* in which we find our being and through which we move. Traditionally, both in my own discipline of anthropology and

more widely in fields such as cultural geography, art history and material culture studies, scholars have focused on the fixities of surface conformation rather than the fluxes of the medium. They have, in other words, imagined a world of persons and objects that has already precipitated out, or solidified, from these fluxes. Going on to equate the solidity of things with their materiality, they have contrived to dematerialise the medium in which they are primordially immersed. Even the air we breathe, and on which life depends, becomes a figment of the imagination.

Now the mundane term for what I have called the fluxes of the medium is *weather*. So long as we are – as we say – ‘out in the open’, the weather is no mere phantasm, the stuff of dreams. It is, to the contrary, fundamental to perception. It is not so much what we perceive as *what we perceive in* (Ingold 2005). We do not touch the wind, but touch in it; we do not see sunshine, but see in it; we do not hear rain, but hear in it. Thus wind, sunshine and rain, experienced as feeling, light and sound, underwrite our capacities, respectively, to touch, to see and to hear. In order to understand the phenomenon of sound (as indeed those of light and feeling), we should therefore turn our attention skywards, to the realm of the birds, rather than towards the solid earth beneath our feet. The sky is not an object of perception, any more than sound is. It is not a thing we see. It is rather luminosity itself. But in a way, it is sonority too, as the musicologist Victor Zuckerkandl explained (Zuckerkandl, 1956: 344). In the experience one has of looking up into the sky, according to Zuckerkandl, lies the essence of what it means to hear. If this is so, then our metaphors for describing auditory space should be derived not from landscape studies but from meteorology.

This leads me to two further points, in conclusion, that address not the concept of soundscape itself but rather its implied emphasis on, first, *embodiment*, and second, *emplacement*. I have mentioned the wind, and the fact that to live we must be able to breathe. Wind and breath are intimately related in the continuous movement of inhalation and exhalation that is fundamental to life and being. Inhalation is wind becoming breath, exhalation is breath becoming wind. At a recent anthropological conference on ‘wind, life and health’, the issue came up of how the wind is embodied in the constitution of persons affected by it. For my part, I felt uneasy about applying the concept of embodiment in this context. It made breathing seem like a process of precipitation, in which air was somehow sedimented into the body as it solidified. Acknowledging that the living body, as it breathes, is necessarily swept up in the currents of the medium, I suggested that the wind is not so much embodied as the body *enwinded*. It seems to me, moreover, that what applies to wind also applies to sound. After all, the wind whistles, and people hum or murmur as they breathe. Sound, like breath, is experienced as a movement of coming and going, inspiration and expiration. If that is so, then we should say of the body, as it sings, hums, whistles or speaks, that it is *ensounded*. It is like setting sail, launching the body *into* sound like a boat on the waves or, perhaps more appropriately, like a kite in the sky.

Finally, if sound is like the wind, then it will not stay put, not does it put persons or things in their place. Sound flows, as wind blows, along irregular, winding paths, and the places it describes are like eddies, formed by a circular movement *around* rather than a fixed location *within*. To follow sound, that is to *listen*, is to wander the same paths. Attentive listening, as opposed to passive hearing, surely entails the very opposite of emplacement. We may, in practice, be anchored to the ground, but it is not sound that provides the anchor. Again the analogy with flying a kite is apposite. Though the flyer’s feet may be firmly planted on the spot, it is not the wind that keeps them there. Likewise, the sweep of sound continually endeavours to tear listeners away, causing them to surrender to its movement. It requires an effort to stay in place. And this effort pulls *against* sound rather than harmonising *with* it. Place confinement, in short, is a form of deafness.

References

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