
For An Awareness of Associations

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The article is also available with sound excerpts at: **eContact**.

People can shape ideas about the world and themselves just by listening to the associations triggered by sounds. Here is one example.

Is it true that the blind live in their bodies rather than in the world? I am aware of my body just as I am aware of the rain. My body is similarly made up of many patterns, many different regularities and irregularities, extended in space from down there to up here. These dimensions and details reveal themselves more and more as I concentrate my attention upon them. Nothing corresponds visually to this realization. Instead of having an image of my body, as being in what we call the 'human form', I apprehend it now as these arrangements of sensitivities, a conscious space comparable to the patterns of falling rain... [i](#)

This passage comes from John Hull's autobiography *Touching The Rock*, which is a work that is regularly cited in recent soundscape research. The entire book is based on diary entries recorded into a Dictaphone. A process that facilitated a gradual twenty year progression to total blindness due to cataracts. Not surprisingly, his anecdotes in *Touching The Rock* revolve around comparisons of what life is for sighted people to what it is for blind people.

In July 1997, I had the opportunity of interviewing John Hull in Birmingham England. Four excerpts from the interview provide the basis for investigating listening without sight. Like in *Touching The Rock*, Hull often compares the experience of life from different sensory modalities. The concept of horizon, for example, is one that varies according to the particular senses available to one.

Now I would suppose that if a person was both blind and profoundly deaf, the perimeter of experience is the skin. You are aware of what your body is touching, and you're aware of fragrances, breezes, but no further. If it doesn't impinge upon your body in some way, then it doesn't exist for you.

What sound does, is to create an environment. That's why I say in one of my books thunder is like scratching. Why is thunder like scratching? Because it sets a perimeter. Your sensations are bounded by skin, and your world is bounded by thunder. Now if you go up, there is nothing up at all. You're just in a boundless infinity of space. As I suppose a sighted person could readily imagine. If you imagine yourself plunged into total total darkness: no stars, no clouds, no street-lamps. What is around you? Where are you? You've got no environment. But sound gives you that sort of horizon of place within which you can situate yourself. [ii](#)

Sound tells the blind person about place. The process of identifying people begins the moment they make a sound; no matter how incidental the sound. The blind listener, on the basis of a half-utterance or a few strides along a path, may need to resolve several questions: Is that a woman or a man?; Do I know that person?; Is he or she coming towards me? Could I be standing in his or her way? Et cetera, et cetera.

The acoustic environment, therefore, presents the world as it exists outside of the blind person's body. The blind listener can determine, for instance, whether he or she is on a main or residential street, simply by paying attention to the patterns in the traffic sounds. To give a different example of how sounds photograph the space around one, there is a large clock tower at the University of Birmingham. The tolling of that clock sounds different wherever one happens to be on campus. This is due to the physical distance between listener and bell, as well as the varying ratios of direct and reflected sound. It is also due to the types of echoes and reverberations heard in different outdoor spaces, as well as the effects of masking in particular areas. Every time the clock strikes a different person gets a unique acoustic impression of structures normally considered to be immobile and silent. Flash, the bell strikes, and one has an exemplification of how sound expresses both time and space in the same snapshot of existence. Interestingly, the buildings play as much of a role in the composition of this snapshot as the tolling bell.

It is on the basis of connecting a series of isolated acoustic (and other non-visual) experiences that blind people compose their image of a particular place. Something happens; it seizes attention; and a new feature is added to the overall impression. All of the evidence about a place seems to fall out of the blue as it were. It is as if the sounds place photographs in the hands of the blind listener, but often these photos are provided without warning. In the following, John Hull illustrates the immediacy with which experiences often unfold.

I think that for a blind person there is no intermediate space. Things are either there or they're not there. You know, you are walking along the road and suddenly a tree hits you smack in the face. It wasn't there a minute ago -- now it's there. Of course that would be unimaginable for a sighted person, who would just never walk straight into a tree.

For sighted people: another person approaches, you see the person a long way away, or coming around the corner. And they get bigger as they approach you, don't they? And finally, they are within shouting distance. Et cetera, et cetera. Alas, you shake hands. None of that intermediate space exists for a blind person. All of a sudden you are grabbed, you are greeted. Somebody calls your name from a few feet away. Now I think that changes the sense of distance and nearness for a blind person. [iii](#)

The immediacy of the moment, or the lack of intermediate transitions, distinguishes the blind person's impression of space. The dominant feeling is that the world is full of perpetual motion and change. Sounds are dynamic and transient. They are soft at one moment, and then unexpectedly loud at another. They can lurk in the distance for a while, and then suddenly, brush against you. One can never predict their arrival or departure. Acoustic experience is, therefore, a whirlwind of unannounced change.

Well, pictures of things are static aren't they? You know, the picture you have of a building; it's just standing there, doesn't move around. Now you never have a sound like that. The sound is always mobile. So in a blind person's world nothing will stand still. Those footprints now, they walk away from us.

Now they've stopped, and the person has disappeared. In a sighted person's world things are both mobile and still -- a mixture aren't they? But in a blind person's world everything moves -- everything is dynamic. If it stops moving then it is silent. In other words it disappears. To move is to exist. [iv](#)

The dynamic sonic environment can appear in one moment like a calm blanket muting every possible murmur. Then without warning it can shower the blind person with a flood of new distractions that beg for undivided attention. When something moves, or sounds, the blind person must take notice. The object moves and produces a sound. The sound of that object approaches, decays, and drifts away. He or she must keep track of the event until it dissolves completely into the peaceful silence from which it suddenly arose. Perhaps he or she will take a mental note for future reference. Sounding objects come and go, but invariably some will return again.

Intrusions of noise, therefore, have different repercussions for the blind person. What might merely disturb the peace of those who see and hear can outright stop a blind person in his or her tracks. It's not the annoyance that is at issue here, but the utter seizure of one's individuality and control upon the environment. Perhaps this situation demonstrates a new dimension to the meaning of noise. Noise is more than just unwanted sound. Noise is also the total occupation of one's consciousness from an unexpected, and certainly uninvited, external sound source. The difficulty in this situation, as the next excerpt will illustrate, is that the blind person has no other alternative but to give him or herself up to this overwhelming intrusion. He or she will have to forfeit individual control until the intrusion has unquestionably gone away.

Of course another difference arises out of the fact that you can close your eyes if you don't like that building, but you can't close your ears if you don't like that sound. So, the blind person's environment is irresistible. It bursts in upon one. In a way which is not true of the sighted person's world. He can control it by shutting its eyes. He can bring it back into focus at will. But the blind person can't do that with the sounds.

... When, for example, I am standing by the beeped crossing in the Bristol Road, and one of these huge vehicles, or some fire carts, roars past, I can feel that post shaking and the ground is vibrating under my feet. And then it's all gone. But I have to pause there for a moment. If the beep then sounds I can't instantly cross. I have to somehow gather myself for a moment, and make sure that my senses... it's just slightly dazing, slightly shocking. It's like a dazzle. It's as if I've been acoustically dazzled. That's what it's like.

And also, the sighted person knows the split second the thing has past, because there is your visual image of it going past. You know it's not going to stop and come back towards you. But for the blind person: the sound roars to a crescendo, and then it starts to die away, you are pretty sure it's gone, but you wait. For one thing, maybe there is another one coming along behind that was masked. So you have to wait until it is quiet again. Now that's peculiar to a blind person. So it's not just the dazzle. It's the acoustic corruption of the environment, which has to settle, before you feel safe to step out. [v](#)

All of these interview excerpts show in different ways the extent to which blind people immerse themselves in their surroundings. The primary channel for this immersion is the

ear. Before concluding, I would like to underscore the importance for creatively engaging in the experiences that pass through us acoustically. Hull's sensitivity to environmental sounds show how they can occupy and frame our deeper emotional experiences -- no matter how banal, annoying, or beautiful they might seem. For example, a sighted person's memory of friends or family is not always complete with just the memory of how they look. In fact, the visual memories reside within the actions of those people. These actions usually include sounds. Therefore, the sounds of people and the sounds of environments are containers of experience. Every breath outward swims with the sounds of the environment, while every intake of breath drinks in the sounds of the environment. Whether one chooses to admit it or not, sound resides within one's existence and sustains it. Sighted people experience this envelopment all the time. Somehow it is less apparent to them than it is to blind people.

However, despite the pervasive presence of environmental sound in any hearing person's life, there remains a peculiar predicament. Which is that people generally lack the means to express themselves creatively through sounds in a way that allows sounds to become, like visual images, carriers of social meaning. Sounds from the environment remain tucked away in the undervalued realm of functional utility. Once people can scrutinize their aural connection to other levels of experience, like for instance their emotional worlds, can sounds in turn be attributed with the potential to carry associative properties.

It would be good to forecast the day when the sonic arts could access a symbolic vocabulary composed of sounds from the everyday world. A language that would be sophisticated enough in its specific cultural associations to put it on par with the vocabulary available to the visual arts. However, vocabularies only develop from a culturally motivated intellectual desire. At this time, environmental sounds function as mere indicators of place, and little more. This is especially evident in the treatment of environmental sounds in conventional Hollywood sound design. There they serve as simple statements of fact or as extensions and cushions to visual effects. Rarely do they resonate metaphorically or serve has a thematic thread for the film.

The usage of environmental sound in acousmatic art suffers from a similar single-mindedness. In this case, environmental sounds are exploited only for their latent musical properties. The social baggage these sounds contain, and the metaphors that lurk within them, often remain unchecked into the acousmatic discourse. There are exceptional occasions where the bags are opened up and the clothes inside them are worn. However, even in these instances there is still a great deal of ambivalence about what is being said or not said. The composer may have one interpretation, but the listeners may have varying interpretations that agree and disagree with the composer. The medium seems plagued with ambiguity, due to perhaps the absence of a vocabulary to interpret environmental sounds with any concrete sense.

Without conscientious efforts to approach environmental sounds with some imagination and sensitive social awareness, the language for coping with the everyday sound world will remain crude and ineffectual. If sound shapes people's experience in the world, than a vocabulary for documenting this interrelationship needs to develop. John Hull provides one example of what should be many. He hears a sound around him. It affects him in a certain way. The impact on his mind leads to a chain of related thoughts and musings. He then records these thoughts into a Dictaphone and later shapes them into a piece of writing. This is creativity channelled through associative listening. The lack of such activity in the sonic arts prevents its critical discourse from ever reading the acoustic environment as a record of social experience.

Footnotes

- i. John M. Hull: *Touching The Rock*. SPCK, Great Britain, 1990. A new expanded reprint is available under a new title: John M. Hull. *On Sight and Insight: a Journey into the World of Blindness*. Oxford: One World Books, 1997. ISBN: 1851 681418. [Return](#)
- ii. Personal interview with John Hull. Recorded on July 7, 1997 at the University of Birmingham in the UK. Special thanks to Joe Anderson for recording production. [Return](#)
- iii. Ibid. [Return](#)
- iv. Ibid. [Return](#)
- v. Ibid. [Return](#)

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