
The Glazed Soundscape

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In the Tunisian restaurant in Montreal, the proprietor and his wife share a carafe of wine fitted with a spout from which they pour the wine directly into their mouths by raising and tipping it, in exactly the way the old wineskin would have worked. The sensation of drinking is entirely different when the liquid is squirted into the mouth rather than sipped out of a glass or sucked through a straw, and so are the accompanying sounds, on this occasion a bright burbling as the air seeks to replace the liquid through the twisted thin spout. Nothing touches the mouth but the liquid. It is probably the purest way to drink, yet it has been replaced by the glass as individual proprietorship has replaced tribal sharing.

Slurping liquids through straws from bottles or cans represents an even greater degree of privatization -the hidden elixir. The glass, replacing more tuneful receptacles, is raised and chimed at the beginning of the meal, partly in compensation for the mute consumption to follow, an exercise denied its prophylactic successor the plastic cup. Materials change, sounds change, social customs change.

The soundscape of every society is conditioned by the predominant materials from which it is constructed. Thus we may speak of bamboo, wood, metal, glass, or plastic cultures, meaning that these materials produce a repertoire of sounds of specific resonance when touched by active agents, by humans or wind or water. The containers and conveyances for water could make a nice dossier of keynote sounds for cross-cultural study. In modern times water forms a strong domestic keynote in the presence of taps, toilets and showers; in other cultures the sounds of water are more clearly marked at the village fountain or pump where all washing is done and from which all water is drawn to the household. Unlike water, stone does not make a sound on its own; rather only when brushed, chipped, scraped or crushed. The various methods in which this happens have characterized cultures in many parts of the world.

Before roads began to be macadamized in the nineteenth century, wagon wheels over cobblestones provided one of the clearest keynotes of all stone cultures, often rising to the level of annoyance, so that straw was often spread over the roads near hospitals or around the homes of the sick to mute the sound of the horses' hooves and the grating of the wagon wheels.¹ Europe was a stone culture and to a large extent still is, particularly in its smaller, less touched communities. When stones were piled up to build cathedrals, palaces and homes, they affected the reflection of sounds both within and without their surfaces, fortifying spoken rhetoric and amplifying music and military parades. North America was originally a wood culture, passing, like modern Europe, to cement and glass during the twentieth century.

Glass is the most imperceptible soundscape material and therefore needs special treatment. Its history goes back possibly nine thousand years or more, though its prominence is much more recent.² About 200 B.C. Roman glass makers learned how to roll out slabs of glass to make mosaics and also to close small window surfaces, though their semi-opacity admitted only feeble light. The manufacturing of glass wax improved by the Venetians after 1300 but it was not until the seventeenth century that the glazing of windows began on a large scale. In 1567 Jean Carre, a merchant from Antwerp, had received a twenty-one-year license from Queen Elizabeth I for making window glass in Britain, but it was Louis Lucas de Nehan's new method of casting in 1688 that for the first time permitted the production of large polished plates of flat glass of relatively uniform thickness from which it was possible to make

excellent mirrors and fill large window openings.

For a long time there was a tax on glazed windows. In Britain the occupier of a house with ten windows had to pay an annual tax of 8s.4d. in 1776, rising to L2.16.0 in 1808. The high rate continued until 1825 when the tax was halved and houses with seven or fewer repealed. In 1845 the industry immediately entered a period of rapid growth, of which the Crystal Palace of 1851, containing a million square feet of glass, became a symbol of its triumph.

During the twentieth century the commercial streets of all cities have gradually suffered their romantic stone work to be chipped away to provide larger display windows, while above them tower buildings that have altogether abolished windows, replacing them with walls of glass. From the streets we are given views of interiors once private and mysterious; from the towers, executives contemplate the skyline and envision distant goals and objectives. None of this is new. We have lived with it for some time. Our concern is with the change of perception brought about by glazing.

The glazed window was an invention of great importance for the soundscape, framing external events in an unnatural phantom-like 'silence.' The diminution of sound transmission, while not immediate and occurring only gradually with the thickening of glazing, not only created the notion of a 'here' and a 'there' or a 'beyond', but also introduced a fission of the senses. Today one can look at one's environment, while hearing another, with a durable film separating the two. Plate glass shattered the sensorium, replacing it with contradictory visual and aural impressions.

With indoor living, two things developed anonymously: the high art of music, and noise pollution -for the noises were the sounds that were kept outside. After art music had moved indoors, street music became an object of particular scorn. Hogarth's celebrated print THE ENRAGED MUSICIAN shows the conflict in full view. A professional musician indoors clamps his hands over his ears in agony while outside his workroom a multitude of sonorous activities are in progress: a baby is screaming, a man is sharpening knives on a grindstone, children are playing with rattles and drums, several hawkers are selling wares assisted by bells and horns, and one shabbily-dressed beggar has targeted the musician's window for an oboe serenade. The developing antagonism between music and the soundscape can be more clearly sensed by comparing Hogarth's print with Brueghel's town square of a century earlier. Take a look at Brueghel's "The Battle Between Carnival and Lent." Hogarth's print contains glass windows. Brueghel's painting does not. Brueghel's people have come to the open windows to listen; Hogarth's musician has come to the window to shut it.

In a study of fairy tales, Marie-Louise von Franz points out that glass 'cuts you off, as far as your animal activity is concerned . . . Mentally you are not cut off. You can look at everything through glass practically undisturbed, for you can see as well as though it were not there . . . but it cuts off the animal contact . . . People very often say, "It feels as if there were a glass wall . . . between me and my surroundings." That means: "I see perfectly well what is going on, I can talk to people, but the animal and feeling contact, the warmth contact is cut off by a glass wall . . ."³ The world of sounds and textures, the palpitating, kinetic world, is zoned out; we still watch it move, but from our (generally seated) position indoors our physical contact with it has ceased. The physical world is 'there'; the world of reflection and speculation in 'here.' Without our participation 'there' tends to become: a) deserted (as around modern apartment houses); or b) squalid (as in dense urban areas); or c) romanticized (as from a resort window).

One could actually argue that noise in the city increases in accordance with the thickness of glazing. The beautiful French windows along the eighteenth and nineteenth century avenues of

European cities, now frosted over as their prosperous former tenants desert them for quieter residences, document how such windows, sufficient at one time to resist street noise, have long since become inadequate. Those windows were intended to be opened; they did not seal off the environment totally as do the unopenable windows of the modern hotel room.

When the space within is totally insulated it craves re-orchestration: this is the era of Muzak and of the radio, a form of interior decoration, designed or absent-mindedly introduced to re-energize the space and render it more sensorially complete. Now the interior and exterior can become totally contradictory. The world seen through the window is like the world of a movie set with the radio as soundtrack. I recall travelling in the dome car of a train passing through the Rocky Mountains with schmaltzy music on the public address system and thinking: This is a travelogue movie about the Rocky Mountains -we are not here at all.

When the division between 'here' and 'there' is complete, the glass wall will become as impenetrable as the stone wall. Even thieves will respect it. Shattered glass is a trauma everyone is anxious to avoid. 'He shall rule them with a rod and shatter them like crockery,' is a potent acoustic image in Revelation (2:27). A keynote of the Middle-Eastern soundscape under normal circumstances, crockery became a violent signal when broken. For us the same is true of glass. And yet one cannot help feeling that the mind-body split of the Western world will only be healed when some of the glass in which we have sheathed our lives is shattered, allowing us again to inhabit a world in which all the senses interact instead of being ranked in opposition.

There are numerous allusions to this in European literature, for instance in chapter 19 of Thackeray's *VANITY FAIR* where the street is laid knee deep in straw and the knocker of the door is removed when Miss Crawley is ill.

1) According to Sir W.M. Flinders Petrie, glaze was known from 12,000 B.C. in ancient Egypt, though the earliest pure glass dates from 7,000 B.C. See: G.W. Morey, *THE PROPERTIES OF GLASS* (New York, 1938), p.12.

2) Marie-Louise von Franz, *INDIVIDUATION IN FAIRY TALES* (Boston and London, 1990), p.15.

(photo) detail of 10 audio ballerinas with amplified metronome sound. Calais 1990.
