Emotion, Space and Society 20 (2016) 42–48

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Emotion, Space and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa

Sound as affect: Difference, power and spatiality

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 27 January 2015
Received in revised form
23 October 2015
Accepted 15 February 2016
Available online 20 April 2016

Keywords:
Sound
Affect
Power
Space
Audio
Body

ABSTRACT

This article considers what happens when sound is understood as affect. It begins by recounting a minor event in which sound moved my body. I use this as a starting point for defining sonic affect as the vibrational movement of bodies of all kinds, moving away from anthropocentric notions of sound based on human perception. The vibration of bodies can be understood as a 'base layer' of sound, which may activate or accrue layers of feeling, significance and meaning, but which is not reducible to them. Developing this conceptualisation of sonic affect, I argue that: (i) there are repeating affective tendencies of sound, but these unfold differently in context; (ii) sonic affect exercises power over bodies, sometimes by combining with meaning; and (iii) sound propagates affect through space in distinctive ways, some of which I discuss. These arguments are grounded in numerous examples, reflecting the variety of both sound and affect.

1. Microphone trouble

On a research trip to Berlin in 2013, I visited Nauenerplatz, a public square which had been redeveloped a few years earlier. The redevelopment had involved attempts to improve the sonic environment, including audio benches that play back recordings of birdsong and breaking waves (Schulte-Fortkamp, 2011). Nauenerplatz is in Wedding, historically an area of economic poverty, with high unemployment, high ethnic diversity, and probably on the cusp of gentrification – a complex backdrop for a sonic intervention. As part of ongoing research on sound and space, I wanted to experience the square for myself and document it using audio recordings and photographs.

Much could be written about the production of space through the redevelopment of Nauenerplatz, the aesthetics, semiotics and politics of the new design, and its public reception. However, I want instead to recount a minor incident that unfolded as I was about to leave. Having spent half an hour or so exploring and recording in the square, a slight sense of something came over me. Skirting the very edge of awareness, I thought I could detect a subtle change of atmosphere; perhaps a hint of having outstayed my welcome, or maybe just paranoia. I looked around. The sun was shining, children were playing in the square, and there was nothing visible to confirm my unease.

Nevertheless, something didn't feel quite right, so I prepared to leave, packing up my recording equipment. I unplugged the fur-covered windjammer encasing my microphones and set it down on a bench while I coiled up the cable. I could hear noisy clattering and shrieking nearby. Feeling slightly on edge, I looked over to see children riding around on pedal go-karts a little distance away, outside a youth centre in the square.

I returned to sorting out my gear, but something in the situation was developing. I have a vague recollection of hearing a sound getting closer, and an internal bodily sensation that is hard to describe: a kind of movement, something welling up, like an electrical charge building. Suddenly my hand darted out and grabbed the microphone windjammer from the bench, lifting it into the air – just inches away from the outstretched grasp of a boy clattering past on a go-kart.

Only at this point did I realise what was going on. A child was trying to make off with my microphones, and somehow I'd managed to foil his game. A wave of relief mixed with panic came over me. Trying to diffuse the situation, I looked at the boy and smiled, but my face probably betrayed anxiety. I felt vulnerable, and also a bit ridiculous. The child looked to be no more than about 10 years old. He was laughing and speaking to me in German. I couldn't comprehend what he was saying, but I got the impression that he was being playful rather than malicious.

Again he reached out to grab the windjammer, and again I lifted it away. I was now acutely aware of being a foreigner, out of place –

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2016.02.004
1755-4586/

naïve to the point of stupidity, wandering around an unfamiliar inner city location with conspicuous, odd-looking, expensive machines. Time to leave. I turned to make my exit, but as I stepped out of the square onto the adjoining pavement, the boy zipped around a corner, steered towards me, and crashed his kart into my feet, blocking my way and shouting. He was still laughing but his speech had turned into shouting and the atmosphere now felt tense. Spotting a gap in the traffic, I stepped sideways into the road and strode briskly across towards the nearby u-bahn station, relieved but embarrassed.

What stayed with me most from this episode was the experience of my hand reaching out unexpectedly, without any preconceived intention, and yet with such precision as to indicate a finely honed sense of what was going on in the space. How did my body know what to do? Perhaps something in the ambience of the square had primed me for possible conflict, through subtle aural cues of volatile energies building, something about to 'kick off'. What seems certain is that the sound of the rapidly approaching go kart moved my body, activating a sensory-motor coupling. The experience recalls Thrift's (2008, 7) description of affect as a "roiling mass of nerve volleys [which] prepare the body for action in such a way that intentions or decisions are made before the conscious self is even aware of them".

2. Sound as affect

The incident in Nauenerplatz might be considered unremarkable, just one of the many surprises of everyday life. However, I recount it as a starting point for exploring what happens when sound is understood as a form of affect. Sound is often referred to as activating feelings and emotions, and that clearly took place in Nauenerplatz, but I want to argue that sound itself is also a kind of affect – an oscillating difference, an intensity that moves bodies, a vibration physically pushing and pulling their material fabric.

Anderson argues that affect is not a single ontological force. Instead, different conceptions of affect operate as sensitising devices, revealing different aspects of life. "The question of 'what is affect' gets replaced by questions of what the terms allow us to do: What do they attune to? What do they show up?" (Anderson, 2014, 12) Accordingly, this paper asks: what happens if we understand sound as affect? What does this conceptual filter allow us to hear?

Building on previous work in this area, I offer four answers. First, I suggest that understanding sound as affect strips back the discursive and socio-cultural layers of sound to begin analysis at a more basic level, with the vibrational movement of bodies. This movement is a 'base layer' of sound, which tends to accrue or entrain other layers – motor responses, feelings, perceptions, meanings, memories and so on – but which does not require these layers, and is thus not reducible to them (Gallagher, 2013). This is not to undermine the valuable insights that can be produced by studying other layers of sound; throughout this paper, my discussions of specific examples extend across a variety of different layers. Nevertheless, commencing analysis with the vibrational movement of bodies, and moving outwards from there, is useful as a way to decentre the human, positioning it as just one kind of body amongst many through which sound propagates. This conceptual filter enables analysis of how sound is sensed, felt and responded to by sentient beings, but also attunes to how sound moves the materialities of other kinds of bodies. At the same time, it avoids analysis becoming too fixated on materiality, since sound is understood as waves of movement *through* and *between* bodies.

Second, I suggest that it is possible to hear repeating sonic-affective tendencies, such as sudden loud sounds agitating bodies to make them jump or startle, but these are far from deterministic. Their repetition unfolds difference. Sonic affects cannot be guaranteed in advance. They arise in situ amongst multiple bodies and forces, often producing unexpected results. I examine auditory bird scaring devices and wind turbine noise as examples of this interplay.

Third, I argue that theorising sound as affect can help in understanding the exercise of neoliberal biopower. I consider two sonic technologies used to regulate public spaces: high frequency devices designed to disperse young people, and automated voice announcements. The announcements in particular demonstrate how affect and meaning can combine to produce effects of power.

Finally, I address spatiality, making observations about how sound propagates affect through space in distinctive ways. This discussion partially addresses Pile's (2010) questions about the mechanisms by which affect is transmitted. Examples discussed include the spatiality of binaural hearing, the participation of bodies in relaying affect through school classrooms, the telephone as a technological transmitter of affect, and low frequency noise as an instance of the spatial politics of frequency.

I have chosen to ground my conceptualisation of sonic affect in these examples because both sound and affect are so varied that little can be said about them in general: "affects cannot be thought outside of an environmental or ecological context." (Ash, 2015, 2) Disparate examples have been selected to evoke the sheer variety of sonic affects. Both sound and affect are always escaping, always on the move, and I have attempted to perform something of this incessant motion in the paper. Audio files and links are also provided to enable readers to hear renditions of some of the examples, in keeping with arguments I have made elsewhere for the expansion of phonographic research methods (Gallagher and Prior, 2014).

3. Conceptualising sonic affect

The conception of affect on which I draw throughout this paper follows an increasingly popular line of thinking from Spinoza through Deleuze and Guattari via Massumi, which defines affect as any process in which bodies affect, or are affected by, other bodies. Affect involves any kind of body impinging on another body in some way that augments or diminishes the affected body's capacities to act. We can think about how teachers affect students, how rain affects soil, or how food affects animals. Affects are often thought of as that which can be felt, but in this theorisation affects are forces that move bodies. These movements may or may not register as what could be called feelings.

This theorisation of affect is not unproblematic (e.g. Leys, 2011), but it is useful in relation to sound because it draws attention to how sound propagates through bodies of many different kinds, both human and non-human. Sound has been theorised as relational, a force that connects bodies (LaBelle, 2010), but thinking of sound as affect goes further to recognise that "[s]ound does not just connect things; it changes them." (Kanngieser, 2015, 81) In acoustics, sound is understood as mechanical waves moving matter – a process of bodies being moved, changed, affected. There is no sound that does not affect bodies of some kind. Equally, bodies also affect sound. Their material characteristics modulate its amplitude, frequency spectrum, timing and so on, which in turn alters its capacities to affect other bodies.

A 'body' in this formulation "can in principle be anything" (Anderson, 2014, 9). Bodies may be human, but also intra-human, such as a cochlear affecting the auditory nerve, or extra-human, such as a body of air vibrating leaves. Recognising how sound affects many different kinds of bodies undermines anthropocentrism. Humans are just one possible element in vibrational assemblages, and in many cases may be marginal or absent. This conceptual move is important because sound is often heard through the filters of human language, music and auditory perception, to the