



Making sense of sound: Visceral sonic mapping as a research tool



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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a contribution to ongoing discussions of the role of sound for producing geographical knowledge. It is argued that sound is an inherent component of critical research of emotions, society and space. Yet we note that there is a lack of practical advice as to how this might come about. In this paper we offer a methodological approach for the analysis of sound that we term visceral sonic mapping to help critical geographers progress enlivening geography through recent rethinking of 'the body'. First, we provide a progress report to chart theoretical and methodological approaches to sound within geography and cognate disciplines. We then sketch a theoretical understanding of the visceral and our visceral sonic mapping. To demonstrate how this method might be productively put to use we draw on empirical material from a driving ethnography that was undertaken in a regional Australian centre from 2010 to 2011.

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1. Introduction: sound and the geographical

The analysis of sound is of increasing importance across the social sciences and humanities. It is straightforward to understand why. Sound, it seems, is often central to inter-disciplinary debates. This is not just because of the effect of sound through the medicalised body in terms of deafness, high blood pressure, tinnitus (for example, Staples, 1996) or the representational politics of sound or music that circulate a particular ideology (Connell and Gibson, 2003; Kong, 1995). It is also because sound elicits emotions. Sound underpins debates over music-emotion relationships in the fields of music and psychology. This approach remains focused on the individual's cognitive processing of sound (Sloboda and Juslin, 2010; Thompson and Quinto, 2011), even while acknowledging there are physiological responses that enhance social connectedness (such as the release of certain hormones that heighten feelings of social wellbeing; Tarr et al., 2014). This analysis suggests that melodic features – such as interval progression or tempo – have certain referential properties that composers can draw on to communicate fairly specific emotional connotations (Cooke, 1959). Others suggest that the emotional power of music lies in the expectations it creates in the listener. For example, music theorist

Leonard Meyer (1956) argues that the emotion and meaning in music arises out of how an individual experiences the unfolding of successive sonic events, and that uncertainty in this progression facilitates music's capacity to generate complex and nuanced emotions (see also Huron, 2006). This approach has focussed on what emotion are evoked and glossed over what emotions do.

Critical sound analysis has provided some geographers with a means to attend to what emotions do, and the geographical constitution of social life (Anderson, 2004; Duffy and Waitt, 2011; Leyshon et al., 1998; Smith, 2000; Wood et al., 2007). Sound is conceived as neither 'conscious' nor 'nonconscious' but both; neither 'cultural' nor 'material' but the two concurrently; neither physiological nor psychological but both at once; neither 'biological' nor 'social' but both simultaneously. In short, sound provides critical geographers with a means of focussing on the relationality of social-spatial everyday life that is simultaneously structured by conscious thought and discursive practice, and non-conscious, visceral or gut responses. Such analysis usually takes the form of what Braidotti (2002) calls a 'posthuman' perspective to conceive of the interweaving human and non-human forces to conceive of subjectivities and place.

In this paper we aim to offer a theoretical and methodological framework in the burgeoning literature on the critical geographies of sound. We argue that the current literature often lacks methodological advice to help researchers interpret sound critically (there are some exceptions, such as the work of Gallagher and Prior, 2014; Wood et al., 2007). A more detailed discussion of methods is

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timely. Our argument is structured in three parts. We begin with an overview of critical sonic geographies. We do this to discuss the methodological implications of two broad conceptualisations of sound in current literature in human geography. The first strand originates in the influential work of Lefebvre (2004) and considers the importance of the rhythmic qualities of sound in forging body-space relationships. The second strand arises out of the soundscape literature. It begins with the work of Schafer and the World Soundscape Project to catalogue particular places, through to the use of portable audio devices such as MP3 players in soundwalks (Bull, 2000; Drever, 2009; Gallagher, 2015a). While both sets of literature contribute to approaching body-space relations in a dynamic, shifting and non-reductive framework, current geographical research remains somewhat vague in comprehending how sound is known through the body. This leaves geographers poorly positioned to consider the interconnections between the 'material' and 'cultural, and the 'conscious' and 'intangible' in our explanations of sound in the everyday.

Having identified the strengths and limitation of the literature, the second section draws on Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2008) and Probyn's (2000) work to outline how a feminist perspective of the visceral brings to the fore the corporeal and tackles sound as a material (rhythm, timbre, biological) and expressive (desire, affect, emotions and ideas) force. Our focus on the visceral means that we are examining how we respond, react and interact with the movement of sound across our body's (albeit permeable) boundaries. The third section offers our method for sound analysis, what we term visceral sonic mapping. Drawing on a driving ethnography undertaken in a regional Australian centre in 2010–11, we use visceral sonic mapping to help follow participants' bodily sensations, moods or felt relations that cannot easily be translated into written words. The result, we hope, is a methodological approach that sits well with the potential of video/audio recordings in combination with more established content and ethnographic narrative analysis as means of attending to sonic dimensions of socio-political-spatial life.

2. Methodological approaches in sonic geographies

2.1. Rhythmanalysis and soundscapes

Rhythm is one of the key ways in which we perceive the temporality of sound. Chow and Steintrager (2011: 2) reason that this is because 'sonic phenomena are points of diffusion that in listening we attempt to gather.' Chow and Steintrager (2011) remind us that sound is not something that can be perceived – and captured – in an instant; it is a temporal event that unfolds around and through the listener. We seek out patterns that connect various and sometimes disparate sonic elements. According to research in neurobiology and physiology, these rhythmic qualities of sound and music are significant to creating and enhancing deep communicative interaction and social bonds between individuals within a group (Malloch, 1999/2000, 2005; Nozaradan et al., 2016; Trevarthen, 2002).¹

The role of bodily rhythms in constituting social worlds began to be taken seriously in human geography following Lefebvre's notion of rhythm and ethnographic method of rhythmanalysis (2004). In Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* volume II (2002), he argues that

the rhythmic qualities of the social, the cultural and the political interpellate us within space in specific ways. For Lefebvre, it is the imposed rhythms of capitalist modernity that lead to the fragmentation and disconnection between individuals within society. Listening is central to this analysis. He states that the rhythmanalysist is

always "listening out", but he [sic] does not only hear words, discourses, noises and sounds; he is capable of listening to a house, a street, a town as one listens to a symphony, an opera (Lefebvre, 2004: 87).

As an example of this approach, Lefebvre and his wife Catherine Régulier published their rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean towns (Lefebvre and Régulier, 2004), which provides an outline of a method that records the interrelations of time and space as the town inhabitants go about their daily tasks. Yet, in contrast to the focus of neurobiology and physiology, Lefebvre is somewhat ambiguous in his regard for the role played by the body's internal rhythms. While stating that the rhythmanalysist 'thinks with his [sic] body, not in the abstract, but in lived temporality' (2004: 21), Lefebvre later argues that in order to successfully undertake a rhythmanalysis we must be *external* to the rhythms of daily life, that we cannot 'grasp the relations between the rhythms whose associations constitute our body: the heart, respiration, the senses, etc' (Lefebvre, 2004: 88). Lefebvre's approach, while calling for analysis that originates in the body and is underpinned by recognition that space and time are intimately connected, nonetheless fails to take into consideration embodied experience, its 'visceral, elusory nature' (Simpson, 2008: 5). Nevertheless, it does offer numerous methodological possibilities.

Tim Edensor's (2010) edited collection, *Geographies of Rhythm*, demonstrates one such set of possibilities. Taking as the starting point that 'rhythms shape human experience in timespace and pervade everyday life and place' (Edensor, 2010: 1), Edensor argues that rhythmanalysis contributes to the broader concerns of time-geography. However, unlike the earlier work of geographers such as Hägerstrand (1977) who were disinterested in the body's experience of space and place, a rhythmanalysis method allows the exploration of our daily 'temporal structures and processes that (re) produce connections between individuals and the social' (Edensor, 2010: 2). This diverse collection of research is clearly located in studies of the everyday, with a focus on the daily routines and flows of urban places (Degen, 2010; Wunderlich, 2010), yet how particular rhythms can emerge and challenge normative ways of inhabiting place (Hall, 2010; Spinney, 2010), and can alert us to the complex processes out of which place emerges (Evans, 2010).

Others have taken up certain components of Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis, such as ideas about entrainment that are used to demonstrate how the body's capacity to sense rhythm 'organise[s] the subjective and cultural experience of place' (Edensor, 2010: 5). For example, Duffy et al. (2011) examine festival parades to better understand how 'embodied responses to rhythm are crucial to the marking out of a space of communal identity and notions of belonging or alienation, of dis/connection' (2011: 23). Likewise, Simpson's (2008) work on street parades also draws on rhythmanalysis as a methodological starting point. Yet, Simpson noted a strange absence of the body in Lefebvre's approach, arguing that 'the conception of the body lies predominantly at the epistemic level, around embodiment; the body itself fades' (Simpson, 2008: 811). In addition, Simpson suggests Lefebvre's perhaps overly reductive qualitative ascriptions that are used to differentiate cyclic and linear time 'shuts down the excessive nature of these rhythms and therefore their analysis. In short, it has deadening effect' (Simpson, 2008: 821).

¹ Studies in psychology and neuroscience have determined that most of the brain is involved in the processing of music and carries information about emotion (Quinto et al., 2013). In addition, the release of hormones such as oxytocin while engaged in music making activities induces strong psychological effects that increase the creation of social bonds (Chanda and Levitin, 2013; Tarr et al., 2014).

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