

R. MURRAY SCHAFER

The Soundscape

R. Murray Schafer. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester, Vermont: Destiny, 1994 (1977). pp. 293.

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Temi.

ASCOLTO / METTERSI ALL'ASCOLTO (nel testo l'ascolto apre le porte alla conoscenza di un mondo altro, e forse 'migliore': è un mettersi all'ascolto contro l'oculocentrismo); ECOLOGIA ACUSTICA (non solo nel senso conoscitivo ma anche come movimento attivo verso la 'ristrutturazione' del mondo ascoltato); ASCOLTO COME CONOSCENZA PARTECIPATIVA (Schafer avanza l'idea, messa in scena poi da altri autori in altri modi, che ascoltare metta in subbuglio una certa idea di gerarchia conoscitiva, ponendo l'investigatore 'dentro' alla materia); CATALOGAZIONE DEL MONDO AUDITIVO (questo è probabilmente il contributo più importante del testo).

Citazioni:

“The soundwalk is an exploration of the soundscape of a given area using a score as a guide. The score consists of a map, drawing the listener's attention to unusual sounds and ambiances to be heard along the way. A soundwalk might also ear training exercises. For instance, the pitches of different cash registers or the duration of different telephone bells could be compared. Eigentones could be sought in different rooms and passages. Different walking surfaces (wood, gravel, grass, concrete) could be explored. “If I can hear my footsteps as I walk, I know I am in an ecological environment,” said a student. When the soundwalker is instructed to listen to the soundscape, he is audience; when he is asked to participate with it, he becomes composer-performer.” (p. 213)

“Space affects sound not only by modifying its perceived structure through reflection, absorption, refraction and diffraction, but it also affects the characteristics of sound production. The natural acoustics of different geographical areas of the earth may have a substantial effect on the lives of people. For instance, in the Arkansas prairies Thomas Nutall (1819) remarked that “no echo answers the voice, and its tones die away in boundless and enfeebled undulations.” On the other hand, the heavy forests of British Columbia are richly reverberant. (...) Outdoor sounds are different from indoor sounds. Even the same sound is modified as it changes spaces.” (p. 217)

“Reverberation and echo give the illusion of permanence to sounds and also the impression of acoustic authority. Thus they convert the sequential tones of melody into the simultaneously heard chords of harmony. In open Greek amphitheatres where reverberation was of negligible significance (“never more than a few tenths of a second”) harmony was also absent in the musical system. The fact that the

theory of harmony was slow to develop in the West was probably due to the way in which Pope Gregory and the medieval theoreticians took over Greek musical theory. Here we have an example of a cultural inheritance inhibiting a natural development, that is, the polyphonic potential of the enclosed forms of Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals. The reverberation of the Gothic church (up to 6-8 seconds) also slowed down speech, turning it into monumental rhetoric. The introduction of loudspeakers into such churches, as has recently happened, does not prove the acoustic deficiency of the churches but rather that listening patience has been abbreviated.” (p. 219)

“Compare the jabbing style of twentieth-century verse with the more relaxed lines of that which preceded it. Something has happened between Pope and Pound, and that something is very likely to be the accumulation of syncopations and offbeats in the Soundscape. And the perceptible jitteriness in Pound's verse begins after he has moved from rural life in America to the big city of London. Car horns punctuate modern verse, not bubbling brooks. (...) Walter Benjamin has picked up the theme in suggesting that in Proust, a sufferer from asthma, we experience a syntax which suggests fear of suffocating. In his cork-lines study – specifically designed to insulate him from city noise – Proust wrote: “The wheezing of my breath is drowning out the sounds of my pen and of a bath which is being drawn on the floor below.”” (p. 227-228)

“Through a superfluity of activities even special events become monotonous and uniform. Let me illustrate this problem with reference to a single activity which tries to be special all of the time: radio broadcasting, (Television would do as well, but since our concern is with audio culture, let's stay with radio.) (...) Each radio station has its own style of punctuation and its own methods of gathering the material of its programs into larger units, just as the phrases of language are shaped into sentences and paragraphs. (...) The tempo of broadcasting also deserves careful study. The question to bear in mind here is whether such tempi attempt to reproduce the rhythms of social life, or whether they attempt to alter them by speeding them up or slowing them down. In an extensive word-per-minute count of newscasters on four Vancouver radio stations we were able to determine that the reading speeds varied consistently. (...) The all-at-once quality of modern broadcasting is further accented by the uniform dynamic level of programs, a technique known as compression. On some stations all program material is compressed to the highest permissible level.” (pp. 234-235)

“The negative character of silence has made it the most potentialized feature of Western art, where nothingness constitutes the eternal threat to being. Because music represents the ultimate intoxication of life, it is carefully placed in a container of silence. When silence precedes sound, nervous anticipation makes it more vibrant. When it interrupts or follows sound, it reverberates with the tissue of that which sounded, and this state continues for as long as the memory holds it. Ergo, however dimly, silence sounds.” (p. 257)

Considerazioni:

Il testo di Schafer – pubblicato originalmente nel 1977 – costituisce la base teorica e metodologica (e, oserei aggiungere, ideologica) per il suo 'World Soundscape Project' iniziato nella fine degli anni '60, di cui in Italia si occupa l'Archivio Italiano Paesaggi Sonori (AIPS). Il testo, tecnico/teorico, dà voce al progetto, che si propone di studiare il paesaggio sonoro e di catalogarne ed archiviarne i suoni, storicamente e geograficamente, e di monitorare come il suono di un'area cambi nel tempo; allo stesso tempo, l'idea di Schafer è di lavorare consciamente sul paesaggio sonoro, di controllarlo, preservarne certi aspetti e demolirne altri – in questo senso, è un lavoro che inserisce il paesaggio sonoro anche in un'idea di 'planning' urbano e non solo: i suoni sono intesi come parte integrante del paesaggio. E' attribuibile a Schafer, per esempio, il concetto del '*soundmark*' come corrispettivo di '*landmark*', e l'idea che uno spazio possa essere riconoscibile da ciò che offre in materia sonora e non solo materiale / architettonica: il testo dà il via, potremmo dire, all'ecologia acustica come disciplina.

Benché certi aspetti del testo risultino sorpassati nel panorama odierno di teorie e discipline del suono – Schafer propone una catalogazione ferrea e un po' asciutta dei suoni che ci circondano, rimane sempre sul mono-disciplinare / mono-sensoriale, e, data una certa vena spiritualizzante che attraversa il testo, i miglioramenti che propone sono quasi sempre zittimenti del paesaggio sonoro post-industriale – rimane metodologicamente interessante e storicamente – per quanto riguarda i Sound Studies – affascinante, come guida per pensare il suono (per noi, anche in scena) come sistema culturale, spaziale, storico, socio-economico. Il libro è diviso in due parti: una prima parte traccia una storia del suono e di come sia stato pensato; una seconda parte si occupa di classificazione, metodo, e idee verso la manutenzione, la concezione e la progettazione del paesaggio sonoro.