Laughter in the context of urban soundscapes

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Abstract

Fifty people compiled diaries in which they described the sounds of their daily life in cities around the world. Of the 940 hours of observation there were 200 entries that referred to sounds of laughter, both live and recorded. The participants of the research always identified laughter sounds explicitly, unlike other urban sounds. The sound of laughter has a powerful cultural-symbolic superstructure. Learning how we use laughter, what we hear and how we react when someone laughs can help us to understand the key processes taking place in the urban space today. Laughter can at once attract and repel, signal danger and relieve social tension. It can lead equally to social agents' inclusion and exclusion in the situation of interaction, and can largely determine the form and extent of their inclusion. A citizen's interpretation of the sound of laughter depends directly on the media technologies which predominate in the urban environment and channel their cultural experience and sonic imagination.

Keywords: sounds of laughter, soundscapes, sonic imagination

1. Introduction

Laughter is considered to be not only something brought about by humour, or an expression of emotion. Hearing laughter triggers the processes of social bonding, agreement and regulation on the one hand, but on the other it may also provoke conflict and separation. Laughter simultaneously embodies destructive and creative sources (Likhachev et al. 1984: 3, 35, 203–204). Research into the role of the sound of laughter in the shaping of space for interaction in a congested, culturally diverse, rapidly changing urban environment filled with strangers aims at gaining a better understanding of contemporary sociocultural processes.

The basic idea of this article is that the sounds of laughter we perceive in urban contexts are indivisibly related to the various social practices which they symbolically represent. Laughter in the city is associated with a complex space of sensory images. The soundscape, as a cultural and symbolic space mediating the perception of urban sounds and noises, has always been discrete and changeable in social, cultural and historical contexts. The characteristics of urban soundscapes, on the one hand, were determined by the features of local infrastructure and the activities of various social agents over time. On the other hand, the "building material" of soundscapes is their agents' various sonic imaginations arising from their own cultural

experience, and from the concentration of global cultural and symbolic flows directed by cultural practices.

In this article, the role of laughter in urban soundscapes will be discussed in the contexts of laughter's basic social functions in the organisation of cultural diversity and the development of audio-visual technologies as an important factor in the transformation of sensory culture and sensory practices. The thematic framework of this essay relates to three broad, heterogeneous, multidisciplinary research fields: humour-, urban- and sound studies. This article aims to collate ideas from these different interdisciplinary fields, based on analysis of existing written research. The noise and sounds of the city are a reflection of the social connections, meanings and values that imbue it (Logutov 2017: 47). The hearing and identification of laughter have both a social and spatial character. As with any sense, it contributes to people's orientation in their living space and inclusion in spatial relationships.

The study of sensuous practices targeted at sounds of laughter involves "interrogating the hierarchies of the bodily senses" (Urry 2000: 79). Our interactions in the urban space, the identification of its objects, contours and boundaries, our sense of control and security are based on multisensory experience. Smells, sounds, tactility play no less important a role than visuality in our everyday life. Nevertheless, from the 17th century to the first half of the 20th century, sensory patterns of perception were gradually becoming asymmetrical. Over the last century, social and media philosophers have spoken about the "hegemony of vision", which came as a consequence of Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (McLuhan 1962, Anderson 1983, Urry 2000: 80). Another reason for the supremacy of vision is the development of optics and mirror experiments (Melchior-Bonnet 1992, Urry 2000) which entailed the establishment of a complex visual code. Sounds in the era of the "hegemony of vision" became, if not less significant, then certainly less reflective, controlled, and thus rarely entitled to legitimacy in orderly urban landscapes.

The sensory experience of contemporary existence is a routine process of ordering sensory images from day to day. The increased sociability of European cities, as well as of places where strangers meet strangers, has caused a kind of "prohibition" of smelling, touching, making sound. The sound of laughter has also been stigmatised in specific urban contexts (e.g. public transport spaces, workplaces). The visual sense enables the world of both people and objects to be controlled from afar (Urry 2000: 82). Anything alien and breaking the interaction should be removed from view. Visual and textual humour have taken centre stage. Phenomena such as sarcasm, or the reinforcement of the function of face gestures in face-to-face communication, could be excellent illustrations of tendencies associated with the hegemony of vision.

The agenda for the text which follows is firstly to depict the general historical picture of the impact of audio-visual technologies on the configuration of the urban soundscape in general, and on the perception of laughter in particular. Secondly, based on theoretical analysis and primary field research, the text will identify key hypotheses about the role of the sound of laughter in contemporary urban sociocultural processes.

The method which I have adopted in this research and used as a basis for this paper follows a model similar to that of Jonathan Sterne. It emphasises that in speaking about sonic imaginations we are "fascinated by sound but driven to fashion some new intellectual facility to make sense of some part of the sonic world" (Sterne 2012: 5). This concept occupies an "ambiguous position between sound culture and contemplation outside it" (Sterne 2012: 5). "Sonic imaginations" appear as soon as a sound becomes important for someone in everyday life. It is variable, and immediately changes with a person's priorities. Contemporary cultural processes imply pluralist, recursive, reflexive, refigurative sonic imaginations, driven to represent and redescribe. The question to be addressed by this research is: what should the nature of sonic imaginations (with respect to laughter) look like in order to successfully support diverse forms of human interaction in urban zones of social and cultural entanglement?

The theoretical fieldwork refers to imaginative ethnography as a methodology for inquiry into "collaborative" or "co-creative" knowledge making. Data on the social role of sounds in human interaction with the urban space emerges through conversations and exchanges of many kinds (Culhan 2016: 3).

2. Methodology

I have not conducted separate and integral research on the sounds of laughter. The fieldwork described above has a broader focus on the nature of urban sonic imaginations in general. However, based on the data obtained, this paper is an attempt to revise the perspective of the study of laughter in the context of urban soundscapes and highlight this underestimated problematic framework.

Initially, I researched the role of sounds in the process of inclusion in urban space and its exploration by "people on the move", such as exchange students, expatriates, etc. The data received about laughter led me to formulate a basic hypothesis for this article: laughter is perceived differently from any other sound. I hope that the results of the secondary analysis presented in this article will prove to be the beginning of a project focused solely on laughter.

My primary fieldwork has three foci: first, urban environments formed largely by educational migration and exchange; second, students and university workers as people involved in new forms of mobility, especially those stimulated by the emergence of new media; third, sound-stocks and other Internet resources used for sound engineering audio-visual texts. 50 people aged between 20 and 65 years old have already participated in the creation of diaries. The participants in the research project were involved in academic exchanges and international projects entailing long business trips (more than a month). The diaries describe 940 hours of observations, including daily practices related to work, study, recreation, household chores, located at the place of the inviting institution and then at home after the trip. There are about 200 descriptions of situations involving the sound of laughter located. Based on the ideas of Dara Culhane and Cristina Moretti (Culhane 2016; Moretti 2016), I asked the participants to capture their sensory experience and to fill two types of diaries: a journal for one day with the task of documenting and describing what they heard (40 participants); and alternatively to write down everything they heard on a walking tour developed by me (20 participants). 10 of the participants undertook both tasks.

The participants in the project listened to urban sounds as visitors to St Petersburg, Prague, Milan, Paris, Berlin, Trier, Barcelona, Bielefeld, and several other European cities. The research participants came from a range of countries: Russia, India, Italy, Brazil, Ukraine, Germany, Norway, Spain, and Denmark. The diversity of the participants' cultural experiences played an important role in the initial study. As regards laughter, I did not have sufficient data to find correlations between the cultural specifics of these places and the formation of laughter-based special features of the sonic imagination. I was nevertheless able to concentrate on the sonic imagination of the "new nomads" formed by contemporary media technologies and cultural flows that focus on the global urban network.

3. Results

In the course of this fieldwork, I drew attention to the diversity and potential of rhetoric associated with the perception of laughter. At the same time, most other sounds are often barely distinguished by city-dwellers. Almost all the participants' observations related to the sounds of laughter were very specific, and indicated laughter as a sound (for example, "I hear laughter", "mocking intonation", "children laugh", "drunk man's laughter" etc.), while their descriptions

of other sounds are often non-specific, and do not distinguish the sounds from background noise or other designated phenomena ("street noise", "I hear that the neighbour has returned", "outside the window you can hear children returning from school" etc.). Unlike laughter, these sounds were not identified. In these cases, a person reflects only a phenomenon that they have identified by some sound or complex of sounds. Laughter seems to be a special sound. This assumption gives me the opportunity to pursue a more focused research theme in the realm of laughter as an essential part of the urban soundscape.

The research materials show that sonic imagination may be formed by practices on different levels: discursive practices based on everyday experience, as well as those formed in contemporary polymedia contexts.

3.1.   Sonic imagination formed in the contexts of everyday experience

The sound of laughter can become a marker of the locus of communication and merges into the "familiar background" / "familiar noise" in a cafe, bar, or recreation zone. An example is a quote from the diary of one of the participants in the study: "in the recreation room at the University - the usual noise. Guys from my group talk and joke on the same topics like a week or like three days ago. <...> I do not even understand what language they talk and joke in" (female, 21 years). Here the listener perceives laughter and a mocking tone of voice as a marker of communication quality. Laughter could also inform about events of everyday life and help create and maintain personal relationships: "At home, I am greeted by silence - and I do love this feeling most of all... After some time in the corridor I heard laughing. The guys from the neighbouring room have returned home" (female, 33 years). Laughter helps you to identify people you know who are out of sight and even to identify their current activities: "I hear my colleague A. laughing in the next office" (male, 43 years old), "My neighbour's voice and her laughter can be heard in the kitchen behind the wall. She's probably talking to her boyfriend" (female, 22 years). This form of sonic imagination is based on cultural images and interaction patterns formed by a long-term experience of living in one place.

Unequivocally positive connotations of laughter arise in places of informal communication in which the research participants belong, or in "third places", as Ray Oldenburg calls them; in casual gathering places that are neither home ("the first place") nor work ("the second place"). "In order for the city and its neighbourhoods to offer the rich and varied association that is their promise and potential, there must be neutral ground upon which people may gather" (Oldenburg 1999: 22) where people can engage in dialogue regardless of their status, daily social roles, cultural background, and financial situation. Here, laughter becomes an inclusive sound, due to the effect of equalizing and of relieving tension based on "joking relationships". The sense of sonic presence is significant in the formation of the framework of communication. In this case, the sound of laughter provides it. This laughter is appropriate in urban locations opposed to routine. The listener perceives it positively when they are involved in or willing to share carnival practices.

In a culturally diverse urban environment, where the traditions and rhythms of celebration among citizens do not always coincide, people try to regulate "noise regimes" through legislation. Since sound challenges control, loud carnival laughter turns into "unreasonable noise", "noise regulation fines" are increasing constantly, and the working hours of places where we socialise, laugh and have fun are becoming ever more strictly regulated. Laughter seems to be regulated informally: inappropriate laughter in the wrong place and at the wrong time falls under social sanctions. Interviewees noted that they felt judged by strangers while having fun on public transport and in public places: "We laugh too loudly and people all around us glance back" (male, 23 years). Laughter from a bar at night, caused a complaint to the hotel administration and a will to windows faced the bar.

Sounds (and especially the sound of laughter) have the effect of involuntarily engaging the listener, inviting them either to share the fun or to distance themself from it. Hearing laughter leaves no opportunity for maintaining neutrality. Exceptions have included non-hierarchical places of communication ("third places" (Oldenburg 1999)), places of localization of urban communities, and partly also spaces of urban feasts and carnivals. Unlike any other form of human action, laughter requires a particular space and time in a city, is dependent upon the configuration of that space, and changes with it. Thus, laughter during city festivals is perceived by the research participants as an important component of the atmosphere ("lively laughter").

Laughter is labelled as a sign of warning or a signal of aggression that often indicates unwillingness to engage in carnival, "antistructural" (Turner 1969) interaction. "Drunken male laughter made me cross to the other side of the street" (male, 25 years), – we read in one of the "diaries of sounds". Here laughter became an issue both of social inclusion for habitués of "third places", and an issue of exclusion for random visitors.

3.2. Sonic imagination formed in the contexts and polymedia development

The research participants noted the sounds of laughter in movies, TV programmes and broadcasts, advertising, interactive game environments, video games, music, etc. Audio-stocks is a site for encoding, standardising and decontextualising the sounds of laughter, and making them into markers of certain urban practices and place. For example, Russian-language audio-stocks use the following description for audio-files containing laughter sounds: "the sound of laughter of a crowd", "sounds of a large number of people in the room", "the sound of laughter, the company of boys", "sounds of baby", "laughter with applause in the audience", "people laugh like in a television series", "talk, laughter, small crowd, sport, crowd, party of teenagers in a small room plays music", "conversations in the women's locker room", "small crowd in the room whispering and laughing", "laughter of a drunken crowd", "funny bunch of people laughing", etc.

Media soundscapes fundamentally change the perception of laughter. They provide a resource to perceive laughter as an "atmospheric background noise" of communication or constant noise in specific urban locations. Audio recording and translating technologies have turned laughter-sound into laughter-noise, allowing people to distance themselves from it, to be transitory, and to not get involved in the interaction of laughter. Media have made laughter "safe", but did not deprive it of its ambivalence. Sounds of laughter still produce controversial continuity of integration in urban spaces. The sound of laughter becomes a signal that one needs in order to redefine one's relationship with someone else, or to know that there are neighbouring spaces, the boundaries of which need to be respected.

The gradual destruction of the hegemony of visuality was driven by the development of polymedia technology over the last century. Today this is especially acute in light of the on-going expansion of corporeality and sensory experience. The transformations of urban "soundscapes" as a cultural-symbolic space of sound, the role of individual sounds (such as laughter) within it, and the reboot of sonic imaginations – these are all now attracting the attention of an increasing number of researchers (Stern 2012). They argue that the technology of the 19-20th centuries significantly changed the palette of activities and values associated with a variety of urban places. Media began to retranslate, mix and associate content (including audio) from different cities and urban locations (Eriksen 2007; Logutov, 2017: 45).

4. Discussion

When speaking about the sonic imagination formed during the era of the "hegemony of vision", most authors, including the founder of sound studies Raymond Murray Schaefer (Schaefer

1977), assume the theses of the regression of the sonic experience, the unorganized sound environment of cities, where all sounds turn into noise, and the sonic ignorance of city-dwellers. However, paradoxically, the sound of laughter never merged with the noise of the city, and did not become devalued (Likhachev 1984). The disappearance of the sound of laughter from some public spaces and its presence in others is associated with two essential features of social experience, which are fundamental to laughter and which allow a person to interpret its sound.

The first characteristic anchors all cases of anti-structural or transitional states of relationships and communities which are essential in situations of conflicting cultural attitudes; simultaneity, or the mixing of different models of social relations, cyclical or sudden changes that require lifestyle restructuring. This component is described in social sciences in the context of joint laughter and the exploration of ritual laughter in carnival culture (Bakhtin 1965; Turner 1969). Also, "joking relationships" were studied by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown as a way of regulating and combining friendliness and antagonism between kin (Radcliffe-Brown 1940). Analysing relations in the context of kinship, local communities, and friendship, anthropologists point out the social uses of laughter to support the processual maintaining or reassembling of interconnectedness and relatedness between people. Nevertheless, when we bring laughter into the stratified, fragmented environment of a city, it is fraught with some very serious conflict. The sound of laughter during a carnival or in the framework of mutual teasing invites you people to engage in unregulated communication. However, in the public space of the city, strangers are distanced from each other and are not ready to be involved in the "carnival"; therefore the sound of laughter is often perceived as an invasion of personal space, as a danger and violation of social order.

Other aspects of laughter include ridicule, satire and sarcasm involving asymmetric and targeted joking that provide instruments for control and social regulation. The ambivalence ambiguity of laughter is fully manifested here. First, laughter becomes a tool for excluding the target. Secondly, it becomes a uniting action for those who are laughing. The sound of laughter marks the boundary and subject relationship not only between those who laugh and their targets, but also between those who laugh and those who do not. In this context, we can observe another type of reframing and reassembling the relationships and boundaries between Us and Them following the shifting of conflicting discourses. In complex urban spaces, derision is localized in the complicated urban spaces to ensure control over the unity of cultural patterns and scenarios. Most often, ridicule is pushed into the controlled space of a show or performance. Today this tendency is distributed by mass media. Analysing the most popular satirical shows in the Arab world, Bassem Youssef's al-Bernāmeg, Mohamed Mifdal described it thus: "[the] satirist holds to ridicule the discursive contradictions concealed by the dominant political discourse and its frames of interpretation by aligning the dominant frames and making them undergo the test of reality sustained and maintained by the audience and its laughter" (Mifdal 2019: 41).

Contemporary cultural processes and new media have caused transformations in sensory processes, especially of hearing. The transformation concerned such media as records, tapes, CDs, the Walkman, virtual reality, TV and cinema. Sound became "the physics of the sound environment, and the experience of the human listener, and the auditory experience of a non-human being, and actively sounding objects, and passive sounding objects, and sound as a medium, and the technology of production and reproduction of sound, and the legal regulations of sound output in public spaces, and always something else" (Mayorova 2017: 16). Therefore, each sound configures the space of relations around itself. The information technology of the 20-21st centuries allows us to hear sounds that are distant in terms of both time and space. Technology has formed sound imagination based on television, resembling, fragmenting and standardising the perception of sounds, changing the urban environment and creating a fluid and complex auditory code.

The way in which we use, perceive, and react to the sound of laughter is an excellent case study of the changes described above. On the one hand, it is still possible to witness persistent patterns of public stigmatisation or localisation of laughter (typical to the visual era). On the other hand, we "watch" – or rather, "hear" – how urban landscapes change under the influence of the soundscape "reassembled" by the film and television industry, and consequently a burst of laughter in a certain place or situation becomes an attribute of these places and situations. The ambiguous and simultaneous interpretations of the sound of laughter could be seen as an everyday manifestation of "cultural super-diversity" (Vertovec 2007).

The sonic imaginations formed by audio-visual texts emerge from a new type of collective solidarity around the combination of common everyday practice and its media images. Hearing laughter in the background of talk shows, sitcoms and movies promotes the replacement of the complex symbolic order of laughter culture with a simplified fluid code of laughter. This code is easy to share. It is associated with the delocalised/disembedded imaginary world of urban life (Auge 1992; Eriksen 2007). For the first time in human history, the disembedded sounds of laughter travel independently of a given person and their relationships. Audio-visual texts liberate the laughter of those who are laughing and make it possible to translate and understand its meaning independently of people, without personal contact. Recorded, montaged and edited sounds of laughter become a symbolic token, which are connected not to the urban, but rather to the abstract realm of digital space.

5. Conclusion

Harmonisation of the physical and socio-cultural urban environment is possible only if we understand the limitations of the visual language of our cities and the role of new media within it, and shape sonic imagination through the awareness of cultural differences in the urban sound environment (Mayorova 2017: 16). The knowledge-base formed around key contemporary sonic practices and recording/retranslating/sharing technologies is increasing the degree of reflexivity towards sound in urban studies and urban lifestyle. Therefore, the interdisciplinary intersection of the research fields of urban sound studies and laughter with humour research also contributes to the essential changes of our social reality. By focusing attention on different ways of embedding laughter in the configuration of urban soundscapes, we can progress beyond simply articulating the very existence of other cultural contexts and other logical processes behind laughter, and move towards trying to develop the conceptual means for an appropriate study of "alterity" (or "otherness", the anthropological problem referring to the construction of "cultural others" (Fabian 1983, Taussig 1993)).

Today the landscape of laughter is formed as a result of intercultural interactions, in the course of which a new sense of belonging, common socio-cultural space and cultural patterns emerge (Kuropjatnik & Kuropjatnik 2018: 259). Laughter spaces mediatise different states of societies, people and objects and their personal, public and information spheres. The sound of laughter invites us to rethink and reassemble our relationship with urban space.

My intention in this article was to substantiate the study of the specifics of the sound of laughter in urban soundscapes, along with the question of the impact of dynamically developing audio-visual technologies on the sonic imagination of laughter. Any agenda for follow up research must include analysis of the laughter discourse in audio and audio-visual texts distributed in the media, new media, games and other digital spaces, the specifics of digital discursive practice, as well as the use of this discourse in everyday practice.

Acknowledgements

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