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Book review

Thinking the city through sound

Acoustic Territories. Sound Culture and Everyday Life
By Brandon LaBelle

Continuum, 2010, 267 pages
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In *Acoustic Territories. Sound Culture and Everyday Life* Brandon LaBelle sets out to chart an urban topology through sound. Working his way through six *acoustic territories*, underground, home, sidewalk, street, shopping mall and sky/radio, LaBelle investigates tensions and potentials inherent in modern culture as “heard” rather than as “seen”. In so doing he further cultivates the ground between sound studies and urban studies, an area already explored notably by Jean-François Augoyard and the Cresson research team, by Michael Bull and Tia DeNora. LaBelle treats the material in his own distinct way, adding a distinct imprint of cultural studies combined with his own essayistic signature, producing true findings and thoughtful reflections, but also leaving behind a few methodological questions.

Brandon LaBelle is a highly productive artist and writer, who has edited and co-edited a number of sound-related publications by Errant Bodies Press including *Site of Sound #1* (1999) and *Site of Sound #2* (2011), *Writing Aloud* (2001) and *Radio Territories* (2007). In 2006 he published a study on sound art, *Background Noise. Perspectives on Sound Art* (Continuum, 2006), based on his PhD dissertation from The London Consortium. The present study is based partly on research done during a postdoctoral fellowship at The University of Copenhagen and suggests a shift in perspective from the history of sound art to contemporary sound culture. LaBelle still draws a lot on his extensive knowledge of sound art, but now artistic practices are treated as sources for explorations of everyday life. Other types of material that are introduced into the study are musical performances and lyrics, architecture, legal and political texts as well as theoretical and analytical texts and literature – along with personal memories, notes and much more. This is not a strict technical study, but rather an involved investigation of what LaBelle tends to call “itineraries” and “movement” of everyday life.

The scheme of *Acoustic Territories* is grandiose. Charting sonorities and auditory imaginations from the subversive and echoic underground through urban topoi like homes, sidewalks, streets and shopping malls up to the radiophonic sky, where visions of a better society reside, LaBelle appears to be writing a modern urban cosmology from subway stations to radio towers. At the same time his investigation is explicitly founded in personal experiences and draws on his vast archive as an artist, musician, intellectual and cosmopolitan. Each chapter begins with a quote from a popular band or musician: The Jam, Michael Bublé, The Bee Gees, The Cars, DJ Funkmaster Flex, N.W.A., The Clash, Brian Eno, Frank Sinatra, and often proceeds to a personal memory of running through streets to catch a train to the airport or lying on the back, watching the sky. Quotes from relevant studies (Chion, Dolar, Augé, Bachelard, Sennett, Augoyard, de Certeau, Connor, Bull, Giedion etc.) are frequently brought in, but one seldom finds more thorough and critical readings of the references. Rather, LaBelle tends to use the material as points of reference for his ongoing reflection, weaving a fine textual fabric that reverberates with its subject. The text has a fantastic drive, and one immediately feels drawn into the reflections, though sometimes cheated of detail arguments. For example, it does not entirely make sense to me how Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia aligns with LaBelle's account of the underground as a mirroring of the ground above. Foucault describes heterotopias as places that "suspend, neutralize or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected, or represented by them" (quoted in LaBelle, p. 31), while the underground in LaBelle's account remains tied to an established cultural geography of the bellow as subversive to the above. It is more likely that the subway station platform would fit the cited definition of heterotopia if it was transformed, for example, through the intervention of a musician or a salesman/woman, to something completely different. An *other* space.

This last remark on the use of heterotopia may emphasise a more general topic of discussion, regarding the method employed in *Acoustic Territories*. Structuring the material into six distinct *territories* seems to work well in order to organise the investigation, but the concept "acoustic territory" somehow lacks definition, which allows the study to take many directions at once. LaBelle does not even touch upon the ethological and geographical definitions of territory, but briefly outlines acoustic territories as a product of territorialisation and, thus, inherent to political processes, tensions, itineraries and movements between and among different forces (pp. xxiv-xxxv). The Deleuzian inspiration being prominent (but unaccounted for), one may notice that Deleuze and Guattari are reluctant to use the word "territory", which to them is a product of the state apparatus. LaBelle is cautious here, as he continuously stresses the multiplicity of his territories, but at the same time he coins each of his acoustic territories with one sonic figure: the underground is conditioned by the echo, home by gestures of silencing, sidewalks by rhythm, streets

by vibrations, shopping malls by feedback and the sky by transmission. Even though such overall characterisations often work very well to frame the discourses and practices considered in the study, one feels compelled to challenge the layout and investigate the different types of territoriality being played out in the studied locations. For example, when LaBelle finds within homemaking an urge to silence exterior noise, it would be interesting to see how such practices are being performed in different locations, while LaBelle instead – through Richard Sennett – stages a cultural critique of suburban order. Refraining from studying either a legislative or a practice-based level of territorialisation, it remains a question whether LaBelle is actually investigating distinctive features of acoustic territories or discursive positions embedded in an urban and intellectual mythology. This is not to say that such a study lacks relevance, but it is a shame that LaBelle is unclear and even enigmatic about the method and the aims of his study. We are told that “Auditory knowledge is non-dualistic. It is based on empathy and divergence, allowing for careful understanding and deep involvement in the present while connecting to the dynamics of mediation, displacement and virtuality” (p. xvii), but where does that leave sound studies? Does such a paradigm leave out the analytical in favour of an essayistic and emphatic approach?

As a writer, artist, researcher, teacher at the National Academy of Arts in Bergen and much more, LaBelle himself spans a large territory, and the book gains much from his vast knowledge. He seems to work fast, he senses currents and tensions and puts them into words in order to share and discuss his observations. Such generosity makes *Acoustic Territories* an inspiring study full of knowledge, references and thoughtful reflections. One could have hoped that the book, which comprises three previously published articles and three new ones, would have been more ambitious in constructing an argument. But there is no doubt that LaBelle once again succeeds in charting features of an auditory “terra incognita” to be further explored in the years to come.

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