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SONIC MATERIALITIES

**Underneath it All:
Uncanny Sounds, the Materiality of the City
Through the Ear of the Other**

Patrick Fuery

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I hear the song of birds, I hear the lowing of oxen, I hear the sighing of the wind, I hear the roaring of the sea. I have a feeling, in each of these cases; a consciousness, which I can distinguish not only from the feelings of my other senses, but from the other feelings of the same sense. ... I become conscious in a particular way.

John Stuart Mill

One of the intricate connections that shapes urban spaces is made through the interweaving of divergent, competing, and complimenting sounds. Just as objects, inhabitants, and histories form urban spaces, there is also an aurality that defines each one, distinguishing it from all others. The flows and ripples of these different soundscapes simultaneously challenge the separations of urban spaces and reinforce the distinctions. At the most overt, these are the sounds of the market as they exceed the spatial boundaries and mix with traffic noises; the softer sounds of the park that muffle and hold construction clamor; the multicultural voices as they form an urban soundscape which is diverse and continuous. The polyphony of the city manifests as the drowning sounds that form layers much like psychoanalysis' versions of the 'noisy', apparent conscious and seemingly silent unconscious. We 'hear' the conscious sounds (of the city, of the noisy parts of our psyche) as if they are all that is to be heard, while the susurrations of other, powerful, sounds are less, perhaps never, attended to with the same awareness. These competing sounds are beyond the sense of decibels (some sounds quite literally drowned out by

louder and more persistent ones); rather, they work in this psychoanalytic parallel of us being attuned to hear some sounds more than others.

Underneath It All: Some Notes on the Uncanny

Psychoanalysis is somewhat premised on the idea that what lies beneath is more significant than what appears on the surface. Even though it is known, via one of Freud's patients, as the talking cure, there is a tactic and technique which binds it to the opposite – the need to attend to the unheard sounds. In the case of psychoanalysis this includes dreams, acts of creativity, the repetition of a thought or feeling in different forms, and even the body itself: 'If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips.'¹

I wish to adapt this model for the issues at hand and suggest that the diversity and layering of sounds in urban spaces might include four iterations: These are:

1. *the heard semiotic systems of urban spaces themselves* – the manifested sounds of speech, shouts, cries, vehicles, music, and so on;
2. *the silences which enable these sounds to be transmitted* – this includes the air/medium which holds the vibrations and enables all the sounds to travel together and individually, combining into a distinctive and defining 'hum' – it affectively identifies the urban space(s);
3. underneath it all, *the unheard sounds*, almost impossible to detect;
4. versions of what the linguist Halliday described as *anti-languages*, those utterances operating in secret, within a larger shared language system, revelatory in terms of power structures.²

To follow the psychoanalytic model a little further, the languages of urban spaces are our most conscious ones, the silences the mechanisms of our preconscious carriers, the unheard (*anti-languages*) are the sounds of and from the unconscious, and the fourth are those 'unconscious' sounds rediscovered and heard as if a secret has been revealed. To hold the parallel even further, these last ones are dream sounds, audible when passing through a version of Freud's concept of considerations of representability.

To these four we can add another aspect – that of the ear itself. Derrida, via Nietzsche and Freud, reminds us that the ear can be located as part of the uncanny: 'The ear is uncanny. Uncanny is what it is; double is what it can become...the ear is the most tender and most open organ, the one that, as Freud reminds us,

1 Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis Vol XVI*, (trans. J Strachey), (Vintage 2001), 68.

2 M.A.K. Halliday, 'Anti Languages', *American Anthropologist*, Vol 78, 31 976, 570-584.

the infant cannot close.³ This double that Derrida indicates is important here, for it locates the ear as an uncanny organ as well as something which produces and conveys the very manifestations of the uncanny. This quality is so often dampened down, muffled and silenced, that we become convinced that what we hear is all that is to be heard and all that is possible to be heard.

The Uncanny and/as sound(s)

Freud's uncanny - *Unheimlichkeit* – is the familiar made strange and the strange made familiar, the disturbing, the almost forgotten known that reemerges and catches us unawares. In this way uncanny sounds can be thought of as the unheard as well as a version of anti-languages in the processes of the making of urban spaces. For Freud, the uncanny entwines pleasure and anxiety. His clever interpretation rests on the idea that repressed anxieties are in a continual state of 'returning', and that this is where the uncanny aspect lies. As he puts it '... if this [returning] is indeed the secret nature of the uncanny, we can understand why linguistic usage has extended *das Heimliche* (homely) into its opposite, *das Unheimliche*; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.'⁴ From this we might think of a special type of uncanny sounds, returning with pleasure and anxiety, the known and unfamiliar, to our ears. Such sounds would be heard as strange yet familiar, creating desire and uncertainty, forming intimacy. The exemplar here are those sounds of nature, and their uncanny affect of aural rewilding. Such sounds become part of the making and articulating of uncanny urban spaces; they are not alien and foreign to the urban, nor are they a part of it. It is to find them in the urban space that renders the sounds otherwise. These wild sounds are a return rather than something new; their uncanniness is not because we haven't heard them before, but because we have always known them. In this we see the duality – the sounds themselves have become uncanny, and the uncanny ear is evoked in the sounds. These sounds are always with us in cities yet occupy a different semiotic 'frequency'. They require a different attention, the ear of the other, to be realized; and in this they are manifested not just as sound but also as affect. Ultimately, such sounds are part of a rewilding of the city spaces and their occupants, made all the more uncanny because of their presence in the urban polyphony defined

3 Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other* (trans. Peggy Kamuf), (University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

4 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works SE XVII* (Hogarth, 1955), 218-252.

precisely as the antithesis of nature. Two examples of uncanny sounds and the othered ear are [singing ants and singing sand dunes](#).

Rewilding Sounds (re)Making Urban Spaces

I would like to illustrate this idea of rewilding sounds and the uncanny as they make and remake as well as renew urban spaces through two different examples, each chosen to suggest that the polyphonic extends to this category of sounds themselves. Indeed, the uncanniness can be seen to form not within the sounds but within the ear of the other, or perhaps more correctly, as they inhabit the ear, turning that organ into something of another consciousness. It is our attending to the sounds which makes them audible, to exist, as well as evokes a pleasurable and anxious return of the repressed. As reflected in the epigraphical quote, to gain the ear of the other is to become conscious in a particular way and of a particular thing; it is also to feel and experience an otherness. This ‘becoming conscious’ is significant because it challenges the binarism of ‘sound’ and ‘silence’, and even the status of being mellifluous or cacophonous. This phenomenology of the sound and ear can be understood through Husserl’s *Achtsamkeit*– the caring attentiveness towards something which gives us, the listener in this case, presence.⁵ Once we attend to certain sounds we become present in a different way; we experience differently. The attending ear of the other has a further function in this regard. The uncanny rewilding sounds are always around us, always *in sonare*, in sound. What shifts is the types of silence and types of noises that are created in the spaces. In this we experience, phenomenologically speaking, the making and remaking of a different urban environment defined through sound(s). The following sounds, and silences, serve as exemplars of such spaces as they are remade by the ear of the other. These are secret languages which are always present, but like the almost forgotten and now unused/silenced word *wold* (an early Scandinavian word that gives us English terms ‘wild’ and wilderness) lying underneath, determining and redetermining how and what we hear.

It is possible to stand in the wider Los Angeles environs at night and hear coyotes; their howls and yelps underlie the urban aurality of the city. These are sounds that have never really been silenced, just moved to narrowed locations; the same is also the case with mountain lions. A less familiar sound is that of the wolf howls, only be heard in the northern region of the state, and far from LA and urban areas. However, a version exists on the outskirts of LA at the Wolf Connection sanctuary.

5 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas*, (trans. WR Boyce Gibson), (Allen and Unwin, 1931).

In this example the issue is not the silence of wolves because of their absence, but their reimagined presence in the peri urban domains. We have grown familiar with the idea of the noisy, howling wolves, creating communications and spaces through their chorus, but only in mediated ways. The wolf howl in our environment has been replaced by those sounds in film, television, and social media.

The second example is more commonplace and relates to perhaps all urban areas and their underlying uncanny sounds. This is the persistent and diverse register of bird sounds. Perhaps no other (wild) animal symbolizes so well this idea that the ear has the capacity to be the uncanny and make the uncanny. There are countless examples to be had, but the two here relate to LA and London. The Moore Laboratory of Zoology at Occidental College's (LA) longitudinal study of bird sounds in the city, FLAPP (Free-Flying LA Parrot Project), examines the parrot population in terms of numbers, range, and noise and is part of a larger examination of soundscapes and the human-bird coexistence. According to FLAPP-director John Moore 'the birds struggle to be heard in some places but find surprising respite in other areas'.⁶

By way of further example of such struggles, below is a sound piece from Borough Markets in central London. The restraining silencing of the birds, to the point where they might be considered absent, becomes undone once we listen for a respite from the traffic noise. As with the LA soundscape, it comes almost as a surprise once we attend to sounds outside of the usual, expected city sounds of traffic and conversation.

This struggle and respite to be heard relates to the third example is the *Forgotten Songs* installation by artist Michael Thomas Hill, with its empty bird cages strung high above a city street. The sounds of birds displaced from their natural habitat, or adapted to the city one, drift down as reminders of what sounds once existed in these spaces. These othered sounds are never silenced, just working unattended in a layer of the city.⁷

Soundscapes and the Other Ear

Hill's installation presents a version of a soundscape that plays with the idea of silenced sounds; it also serves as an illustration of some of the key ideas in the research by Bernie Krause. His work on sound and the natural world has been highly influential in developing the concepts of soundscapes ('the acoustic structure of any environment, whether urban, rural, or natural') and acoustic ecology ('the rela-

6 <https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/free-flying-los-angeles-parrot-project> [quote from personal correspondence].

7 <https://www.cityartsydney.com.au/artwork/forgotten-songs>.

tionship between soundscape and listener and how this relationship characterizes the quality of any given urban, rural, or natural soundscape.⁸

This second term is particularly apposite here as it opens up the issue of uncanny sounds in a different way. Krause points out that ‘natural soundscapes ... are no longer the primary indicators most of us use to gather knowledge about our environment.’⁹ This is the othering of our ears and the uncanny rendering of certain (natural) sounds in our urban environments. Perhaps one of Krause’s most evocative explorations is with spectrograms of natural sounds, revealing how specific habitats produce bands of sounds by different species. Each group produces sounds at different frequencies, producing a unique system of communication.¹⁰ When disruptive noises intervene (here a military jet), the natural frequencies are altered, with significant consequences: ‘While they [the amphibians] attempt to re-establish the unified rhythm and chorus, individual frogs momentarily stand out’¹¹ leading to vulnerability to predators.¹² One of the more distinctive examples of nature sounds as uncanny otherness is revealed in Krause’s recordings of singing ants and singing sand dunes. That such sounds exist may strike us as uncanny in itself, that they can render our ear as the other to both the sounds themselves and to our self (quite literally a ‘I cannot believe what I am hearing’-phenomenon), which illustrates how the attentive care we give to othered sounds transforms us as much as those parts of nature that create them. These biophonic structures can also be seen as uncanny sound maps; once we attune to a ‘frequency’ we attend to a version of the uncanny that lies beneath.

8 Bernie Krause, *Wild Soundscapes*, (Yale University Press, 2016), 16-17.

9 Krause, *Wild Soundscapes*, 17.

10 Normal toad chorus: <https://soundcloud.com/yup-digital/3-spadefoot-toad-chorus-normal>.

11 Krause, *Wild Soundscapes*, 30.

12 Disrupted chorus: <https://soundcloud.com/yup-digital/4-spadefoot-toads-with-jet-flyover>.

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