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## **Listening as Methodological Tool: Sounding Soundwalking Methods**

John L. Drever

### **Soundwalking as an Emergent Practice**

Amongst the interplay of competing commands and demands for our attention in daily life, multitasking attentive listening to the here-and-now with the bipedal locomotion mode of ambulation – along with an inordinate amount of other incessantly shuffling and intermingling of tasks – is considered by many as routine. Relentlessly endeavoring to attend to the sounds around you, whilst dwelling in and passing through everyday environments for an extended duration of time, by actively curtailing other customary cognitive tasks or behaviors, on the other hand, is an atypical activity. Prefiguring the developments of sensory ethnography (Pink 2015) and the “sonic turn,” (Drobnick 2004: 10), such a pursuit, under the overarching term, soundwalking, has been employed over the past 40 years as a designated and dependable, even vital sonic method.

Approaching soundwalking as an emergent rather than a transplantable fixed practice with an ossified methodology, this chapter will feed off historical precedence and draw from the author’s direct experience as a soundwalk facilitator in multiple situations, catering for participants with disciplinarily specialisms including acoustic engineering, architecture, ornithology, city planning, accessibility, social science, and arts practice, and extending out to school children and the general public at large – all stakeholders and individuals with diverse general and specific needs, concerns and understandings. Attentive concentration on listening is an engrossing experience where one can become absorbed in the flow<sup>1</sup> of the enveloping soundscape. As it is beholden on the soundwalk leader to guide and to plan ahead to the safe and sound completion of the walk, whilst poised to attend to any pressing pragmatic issues that may transpire midst-walk, the actual emphasis on their listening tends not to be prioritized. But this in turn permits the participants to dedicate their entire attention to the task in hand. So, reversing roles, the author will also reflect on his various soundwalking experiences as participant – experience which encompasses dogmatic and more idiosyncratic approaches, in formal and performative, intimate and extrovert configurations. The chapter will critically reflect and evaluate on this multitudinous data-set that endeavors to incorporate and verbalize sensuous experience and behavior, whilst surfacing the practical, logistical, and ethical vagaries. It will unashamedly concentrate on soundwalks that do not incorporate audio playback via headphone or aspects of telepresent or augmented reality (beyond participants’ regular use of audio prosthetics) such as audio walks by e.g. Janet Cardiff, Christina Kubisch, and Duncan Speakman; it is contended that soundwalking with the “naked ear” is an already

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<sup>1</sup> “The state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 4).

highly sophisticated and infinitely practicable and malleable methodology suitable for multiple research, training and artistic needs.

## **Evolution**

The dominant traits of soundwalking appear to coalesce in the 1960s around the Fluxus movement (where foregrounding, framing, and enacting forms of gait were a recurring theme) and the experimental music scene in part influenced by but departing from exemplars posed by John Cage, typified in *4'33"* (1952): in particular, the open air activities of Philip Corner, Max Neuhaus, and Ben Patterson, who in their own ways radically inverted concert hall conventions and aesthetics with the world outside. This attitude is most clearly exemplified by Neuhaus' rubber stamping the imperative "LISTEN" (1966) on to the hands of a small group of participants, and leading them down West 14th Street, Manhattan, and in subsequent trips to out-of-the-way sites such as power stations.<sup>2</sup>

It is with R. Murray Schafer and the prodigious exploits of the handful of Vancouver-based researchers that constituted the aspiringly named World Soundscape Project (WSP) in the 1970s, that the soundwalk is pinned down and codified as a method: this is most clearly expressed and promulgated in a special issue of *Aural History* focused on *Sound Heritage* (1974), in Schafer's instructive paper "Listening" (1974) and from a more personal and motivational perspective, Hildegard Westerkamp's (an enduring practitioner and passionate advocate of soundwalking) paper "Soundwalking" (2007). Echoing the pervasive uptake of walking in its many manifestations as core practice across-the-board (see Evans 2012; Qualmann and Hind 2015; Smith 2014), in the past decade soundwalking activities have mushroomed. In 2013 it was adopted in English primary schools as a recommended activity for Key Stage 1 (i.e. pupils age 5 to 7) of the *National Curriculum in England* (Dept. of Education 2013), and in August 2018 it was enshrined and endorsed as a *bone fide* scientific method for acoustic engineering in Part 2 of the ISO standard on *Acoustics – Soundscapes* that is concerned with *Data collection and reporting requirements* (ISO 12913-2: 2018).

## **Soundwalking**

The conjoining of "sound" and "walk" to produce the compound noun, "soundwalk," presents an immediately graspable and yet imaginative concept – I have tended to opt for the continuous tense form, "soundwalking," indicating that it is an action that is in progress associated to time, space and place, albeit on occasion vicarious or virtual. In the opening line of "Soundwalking," Westerkamp articulates the soundwalk quite simply as "any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment" (Westerkamp 2007: 49). For Westerkamp and for the interdiscipline of acoustic ecology in general, this is no passive pursuit

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<sup>2</sup> For a pre-history of soundwalking see Drever 2009.

however, the practice demands practise, and in turn redoubles “attentive listening,” towards “aural awareness on a wider scale” (Westerkamp 2007: 52). From a preliminary survey of the rhetoric surrounding soundwalking you can find “attentive” been treated synonymously for other affirmative adjectives, each brining its own inflection, on describing the kind of listening soundwalking may engender: “critical,” “engaged,” “active,” “relational,” “meaningful,” “interactive,” “connective,” “deep’,” “sensitive,” “purposeful.” What characterizes the soundwalk as a sonic method, however, is its alignment with the meta-concept of soundscape, again both a concept nurtured by the WSP and recently stamped by the ISO, defined as an “an acoustic environment as perceived or experienced and/or understood by a person or people, in context” (ISO 12913-1: 2014). Thus, it is in the interrelationship and intra-relationship (Barad 2007) between participant(s) and prevailing acoustic environment that they encounter and experience that is the *raison d’être* of the soundwalk. But, as we will examine, what actually constitutes a soundwalk and the motivation for soundwalking is a moot point.

### ***Five Village Soundscape***

The WSP made extensive use of soundwalking methodology in their *Five Village Soundscape* project of between February and June of 1975, where they “undertook to study the soundscape of northern Europe” (Schafer 1977a: 1). Fully aware of resource and time limits, they strategically decided to focus on a comparative soundscape study of five European villages, allowing a week to ten days of concentrated study in each location. On arriving in a new village, recuperating from their long journey in a rented Volkswagen bus, they would expeditiously get to work, first activity being a walk: to provide them with “an immediate initial sensory experience [...] which each village evoked” (Schafer 1977a: 11). This outsider’s ear, even naïve listening is akin to Elias Canetti’s resistance to prior knowledge espoused in his travelogue, *The Voices of Marrakesh*: “I wanted sounds to affect me as much as lay in their power, unmitigated by deficient and artificial knowledge on my part” (Canetti 2003: 23). It could also be considered an enactment of an auditory take on the consumption of place parallel to John Urry’s notion of the tourist’s gaze: “Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through day-dreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasure, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered” (Urry 1995: 132).

Moving on from their initial “touristic” impressions, they analyzed the “acoustic rhythms and densities” (Schafer 1977a: 21) in a more systematic, quasi-statistical and consistent fashion: along with traffic counts, 24-hour long sound recordings and sounds preferences tests, they used their own hearing as a diagnostic tool. They were tasked with creating “sound catalogues of all acoustic events heard by listeners in all areas of the village during half hour periods at five times between 7 am and 7 pm. To compile this the village was divided into

sections and project field workers moved continuously through the streets listening to every sound heard" (Schafer 1977a: 21).

Deliberately focusing on manmade sounds, the team assigned what they heard into pre-arranged categories such as motor traffic, human traffic (e.g. footsteps, bikes), voices, indoor or outdoor human activity, domestic animals, electro-acoustic (Schafer 1977a: 27-28). In 2000 the villages (with the addition of Nauvo in Finland) and the research methodologies were revisited in the *Acoustic Environments in Change* project, led by Helmi Järviluoma. 25 years on the researchers were finding this specific task limiting as they found it "distracted from concentrating on the environment itself" (Vikman 2009: 63). Departing from a mechanistic process they found themselves inclined to acknowledge their auditory perception *in situ* "we distinguished between distances and directions of the sound sources, or the order in which a cluster of sounds were heard, so that chains of perceptions of each listener walker could be constructed later" (Järviluoma et al. 2009: 63).

### **Soundwalk/Listening Walk**

Where Westerkamp regards soundwalking as an all-encompassing term that may include a wide variety of approaches which foreground listening, Schafer calls for a differentiation between a listening walk and a soundwalk, where "a listening walk is simply a walk with a concentration on listening" (Schafer 1974: 17). The soundwalk on the other hand may be an elaborately devised affair, where specific modes of listening to the environment may be prompted by maps or scores and/or a greater level of performativity through sonic interventions or choreography by the participant or interlocutors, such as engineering, "a dialogue with a slat fence by dragging a stick across it" (Schafer 1974: 17) – the kind of nascent sonic playfulness and openness displayed by children on entering a highly reverberant space.

I participated in such an active approach at the inaugural symposium for the *International Ambiance Network* hosted by CRESSON (Center for Research on Sound Space and the Urban Environment) in Grenoble in 2009. Merging their expertise in dance, choreography, ethnology, and architecture, the *Collectif Rendez-Vous* led simultaneous soundwalks through the streets to prompt the delegates in identifying through *in situ* active listening and performative interventions, sonic effects. The "sonic effect" is pragmatic listening tool developed in CRESSON, presented as a repertoire of effects, geared towards apprehending the soundscape of the build environment "that allows us to integrate the domains of perception and action, observation and conception, and analysis and creation" (Augoyard and Torgue 2005: 11).

Echoing Situationist tropes, questioning the perception of the human scale in the design of the city and the way it influences our habitual deportment in an embodied manner, with a frisson of social disruption, the delegates were prompted to play spatial games and explore

rhythmic variation of their steps, and unconventional deportment, including the creation of collective “sculptures de corps” (Dugave and Regnault 2009).

### ***The European Sound Diary***

Not restricted to the villages, soundwalking in the Schaferian sense, was practiced throughout the WSP’s European tour. As they stopped off in cities to undertake preparatory research on the villages, they creatively adapted methods of soundwalking to the contexts they found themselves in. These activities are assiduously documented in the *European Sound Diary* (1977). As well as individual members’ accounts of what they heard, the publication also includes detailed instructions and sound maps on carrying out place-specific soundwalks as, “useful educational experiences for everyone” (Schafer 1977b: 1).

*The Paris Soundwalk* acts as a stimulus to imagining the soundscapes represented or alluded to in selected paintings of the Louvre: “Study the images, and let the genius of their execution speed your imagination to provide the appropriate soundtrack” (Schafer 1977b: 86). It also keeps the participant connected to the physical surroundings, drawing attention to the actual aural architecture of the gallery: “Note marble stairway floorsounds on way up to 3<sup>rd</sup> floor – especially the clicking and ensuing reverberation” (Schafer 1977b: 91).

*The Vienne Soundwalk: Evening in the Old Town*, invites the participant to intervene in the soundscape; for example, on Backerstrasse and Dr. Innaz Seipel-Platz, the walker is asked to “go to the telephone booth. Stomp on the wooden floor [...] whistle yourself through the arch” (Schafer 1977b: 84).

*The London Soundwalk*, which leads from Euston Square to Queen Mary’s Gardens in Regents Park, introduces the notion of thresholds of comfort and discomfort:

- “THRESHOLD OF COMFORT: find the transition point where the roadway sound gives way to the sounds of the park” (Schafer 1977b: 93).
- “THRESHOLD OF DISOMFORT: the transition point where the sounds of the Park are once more buried by the sound of city traffic” (Schafer 1977b: 94).

Whilst conscientious listening is encouraged throughout, soundwalking does not necessarily demand continuous ambulation. Once in the Gardens the soundwalker is invited to sit: “Sit on the bench nearby until someone crosses between you and the fountain. How do they affect the sound?” (Schafer 1977b: 93). The exercise goes on to highlight a highly subjective contextual factor for the soundwalker: “Note the difference between the two threshold locations. Depending on how much the Park has cleaned your ears, the second threshold will be farther from the outer streets” (Schafer 1977b: 94). An audiologist would refer to this kind of aural respite as recovering from auditory fatigue or temporary threshold shift (TTS), however the wording chimes with one of Schafer’s central concepts, *Ear Cleaning* (1967,

republished in 1976: 49-92), originally designed as a series of experimental workshops for music students to metaphorically open their ears: "To induce students to notice sounds they have never listened to before, ... the sounds of their own environment and the sounds they themselves inject into their environment" (Schafer 1976: 49). Schafer, later expanding this concept from music education to the acoustic designer, regarded soundwalking as a principle exercise of ear cleaning, "at the root of the acoustic design program" (Schafer 1994: 213). He also promoted ear cleaning for the whole society, starting with schools, which, as already noted, has now been picked up in the UK's National Curriculum.

### **Soundwalking Methodology Guide**

The following is a fleshing out of the methodology of the much-trodden rudimentary, orthopraxic soundwalk as prompted in Schafer's *No. 13 Listening Walk* of his *100 Exercises in Listening and Sound-Making* (Schafer 1992: 31) and *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Schafer 1994: 212-3). It provides a useful blueprint from which one may elaborate, deviated, ignore or work against. It is not quite, as suggested, "simply a walk with a concentration on listening" (Schafer 1994: 212) as to allow such "concentration" requires the observance of series of strictures and structures.

#### **1. Route**

A route is prepared in advance, considering the specific needs and mobility of the participants. It is important not to be too prescriptive, allowing for some variation on the day; this requires research and ideally a recce of the potential routes. The scheduling of the walk is of course crucial, considering the rhythms of the day, week, season, tides, etc. You may aim to be in a specific location at a specific time to hear prominent soundmarks such as a church clock ringing out its Westminster Chimes on the hour. I often seek out aspects of urban soundscapes that have been consciously designed from a sonic perspective, such as water features and contrasting acoustic architectures. You may attempt to circumnavigate specific continuous sounds being emitted from fixed points, exploring how is the spectrum and throw directionality altered from the different perspectives. Such activity should not be exclusively predicated on assumed auraltypical (Drever 2017) hearing of the participants – creative alternative methods are encouraged.

#### **2. Leader**

The walk will require a leader, which is a position of relative authority and trust. Taking inspiration from the *100 Soundscapes of Japan* by the Environment Agency of Japan (1997), and the *TESE* project on the Isles of Harris and Lewis, Scotland (1999-2002), when I directed a public soundscape study of Dartmoor, *Sounding Dartmoor* (Drever 2007), soundwalking was a key method of engagement, but unlike the WSP, with the help of Dartmoor-based arts

organization, Aune Head Arts, the walks were all led by local inhabitants and stakeholders; they were regarded as the experts of the Dartmoor soundscape.

Emulating Neuhaus, the sound artist Christine Sun Kim has been leading soundwalks through the Lower East Side, a territory that she once inhabited. However, having been deaf since birth, hearing as a prerequisite for soundwalking is problematized; with the aid of graphic and text scores on an iPad, and imparting personal memories, listening “is substituted, emphasizing layers of subjective, interpersonal, and technical mediation involved in non-verbal communication” (Kim 2019).

### **3. Appropriate Footwear**

Participants should come with appropriate clothing and footwear for walking in the specific environment the walk is set, and that does not generate excessive sound whilst moving. Perhaps after Isadora Duncan, barefoot soundwalking could be encouraged, providing a direct vibratory contiguity between ground and skin. Some innovative soundwalkers invite purposefully loud footwear or the acoustic embellishment of shoes: Davide Tidoni’s *Exaggerated Footsteps*, which consists of two metal plates, instructs: “Fix the plates underneath your shoes and take a walk. When the plates touch the ground they activate the acoustics and magnify your own presence in space” (Tidoni 2016).

As a leader my attention is often drawn to the sonic emanations of the participant immediately behind me – footsteps can provide an eloquent building acoustics reference tool akin to a geologist’s rock hammer. During one walk, heralding his presence, the man behind me unremittingly tossed and caught his large bunch of keys with impressive precision for the duration of the walk, the high frequency content providing unparalleled acoustic illumination or echolocation of the space, expertly articulating the morphology of resonances and reverberations (the sound of which he apparently was blissfully unaware).

### **4. Proxemics**

The guide leads at the front like a quasi-mute pied piper, and the group (which should be small in number, say 12) follow on, one by one, leaving a wide enough gap between the participant in front so their footsteps are out of earshot of other participants; they should not crowd each other. I would also encourage the participants to spread out so as not to draw attention to the group, or to limit the group from becoming an invasive or an obtrusive presence.

### **5. Inter and Extra-Communication**

An idiosyncratic feature of soundwalking is the collective observance of silence; talking, whistling, humming, etc. during the actual walk is discouraged, saving up thoughts and insights for the debrief at the end. If participants want to catch those fleeting moments, they



could jot them down. It is important to acknowledge that this facet shifts soundwalking into a ritualistic, performative mode, and can lead to some awkward moments as non-participants attempt to engage in conversation with soundwalkers mid-walk. In addition to the vow of silence, to help dedicate attention on the here and now, mobile devices are required to be set to airplane/flight mode or simply turned off. For practical and safety reasons the leader may talk (if necessary) and keep their mobile on. Schafer is also averse to sound recordings or videos being made by the participants, as I witnessed in a walk in Lisbon in 2005, as he regards it as a distraction for the focal task of listening.

## **6. Duration**

A duration of 90 minutes including post-amble discussion time allows for a range of topography to be covered, and importantly, time for the participants to really tune into attentive listening of place. For the more elite soundwalker, longer durations are of course an option, such as Tony Whitehead's 12 hour overnight walk in Plymouth in 2010, to bear aural witness to a sequence of a day.

## **7. Pace**

I am a habitually a fast walker, but soundwalking should not be rushed: it is not about journeying from A to B. The musical tempo designation, *andante*, referring to "a walking pace" is a useful measure. It was commonly used by composers such as Bach and Handel (Le Huray 1990: 36); there usage predates metronome markings, with *andante* today spanning from 76–108 bpm. This slowed down pace appears to help shift habitual listening practices, and allows people to simply take their time. If you walk through a shopping mall and travel on an escalator, move at the speed that the escalator has set. You may of course be required to speed up on pedestrian crossings, likewise due to congestion you may be forced to go even slower. Go with the flow. Some artists have emphasized the slowness of the walk as a fundamental feature, for example Phil Morton's *Sonic Gaze* which he refers to as "a static soundwalk" (Morton 2019). The urban designer Jan Gehl reflects on his preferred gait of locomotion speed for walking and perceiving, albeit prioritizing sight:

Our sensory apparatus and systems for interpreting sensory impressions are adapted to walking. When we walk at our usual speed of four to five km/h (2.5-3mph), we have time to see what is happening in front of us and where to place our feet on the path ahead [...] At speeds greater than walking or running, our chances of seeing and understanding what we see are greatly diminished. (Gehl 2010: 43)

## **8. Caesura**

When we walk, we move through the soundscape, but we can pause in opportune locations that give themselves to lingering (designed or otherwise), allowing the prevailing soundscape to move around us. This can also be helpful for refocusing listening attentiveness.

## **9. Meteorology**

(Within reason) don't let inclement weather get in the way of appreciating the walk: a sudden gust of wind can sonically bring to life otherwise silent foliage; falling rain drops on surfaces, taking John Hull's heed, "gives a sense of perspective and of actual relationships of one part of the world and another ... I am presented with a totality, a world which speaks to me" (Hull 1997: 27).

## **10. Safety**

Soundwalking is potentially hazardous, as you are inviting people to slowdown and re-orientate their senses in active everyday contexts. Therefore, prompt the participants to take extra care when crossing roads, etc.

## **11. Preamble**

Once the group has assembled, the leader will need to prepare the participants and set the rules, along with imparting pragmatic information. What is said at this stage will prime predominant attitudes to listening, and this will of course depend on the agenda and motivation of the walk's impetus. The mantra-like instruction for soundwalking is: listen! – but this is vague, you may wish to explore concepts of listening, such as "listening in readiness" and "listening in search" (Truax 2001: 21-24). Introduce specific themes you may wish to draw attention to such as biophony or regeneration. Resist divulging the route, but reassure the participants that there is no need to worry: "We will finish on time, at the designated location."

These are the questions I primed participants with, as an activity associated with the 24th International Congress on Sound and Vibration in Westminster:

- We will be exploring the salient characteristics of the Westminster soundscape; is it congruent with your expectation?
- How are the sound sources modulated by this specific acoustic architecture?
- How much cognitive effort is required to listening attentively to the acoustic environment - is it pedestrian friendly?
- How does the actual prevailing acoustic environment shape the pedestrian experience of Westminster on a mid-week evening in July, and how does this experience impinge on your perception of the soundscape?

## **12. Post-amble**

Allow ample time for open discussion in a safe and secluded location where the prevailing soundscape continues but voices are not masked. No contribution is invalid, insignificant or incorrect. Allow time and space for the quieter voices to be heard.

## **13. Questionnaire and Verbalization**

When the aim of the soundwalk is to collect, compare, and evaluate specific data on the experience of the soundscape by the participant, different methods have been applied. The use of questionnaires *in situ* is a simple process and doesn't necessarily interrupt the flow of experiencing the soundscape completely. However, questionnaires may miss valuable nuance and contextual detail of that sensory experience. To capture more involved and meaningful data, researchers at CRESSON<sup>3</sup> developed a walking method, an elaboration of Jean-Paul Thibaud's "commented city walks" (2013), where, "a researcher [equipped with directional microphone] accompanies the participant in order to guide them and to encourage them to speak if necessary" (Tixier 2002: 85). Building up a fuller picture of the location and the responses thereof, they repeat the route at different times of the day, weather, etc. The simple instruction is "to say what one hears and to comment on it." To add commentary to this information they are asked to "qualify them and explain the relations they maintain with the city, the people or oneself" (Tixier 2002: 86). Even for a soundscape studies expert it is hard to reflect on and verbalize one's experience of the soundscape as it unfolds around you, so the role of the researcher is key here in opening up a dialogue between participant and researcher. And the build-up of that relationship through sharing the walk is very much part of the process: "The idea that walking with others – sharing their step, style and rhythm – creates an affinity, empathy or sense of belonging with them" (Pink 2015: 111).

### ***The London Soundwalk – Re-enactment***

Soundwalking promotes untrammelled listening in whatever location the participants may find themselves traversing. However, there are incumbent ethical issues, as such an attitude gives way to overhearing and verges on eavesdropping. On a Sunday morning in April 2009, I lead a re-enactment of the WSP's *The London Soundwalk*, 34 years on.<sup>4</sup> We adhered to the original

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<sup>3</sup> The salient research theme of everyday walking at CRESSON can be traced back to Jean-François Augoyard's formative study of the inhabitants of L'Arlequin, presented in *Step by Step* (Augoyard 2007, originally published in 1979 as *Pas à Pas*).

<sup>4</sup> In collaboration with city planner Max Dixon, the UK and Ireland Soundscape Community, Noise Futures Network and Sound Practice Research (Goldsmiths), and joined by Hildegard Westerkamp.

route and instructions, with the addition of a circuit through the Euston Road train stations which were undergoing major redevelopment. There was one major alteration however on ethical grounds. The original walk also took place on a Sunday morning around Easter time with the inclusion of experiencing “true calm” (Schafer 1977: 92) by attending the morning meeting of the Society of Friends on Euston Road. Soundwalks have often taken in “the inner ambience, reverberation and relative stillness” (Schafer 1977: 92) afforded by religious spaces. On carrying out a recce of the route, I attended a regular Sunday worship which primarily takes the form of collective silence which is regarded by the Quakers as a mode of worship, a practice that parallels some attitudes to soundwalking (see below). I approached an elder of the group after the service and described what I had in mind. I quickly realized that bringing in our soundwalking group to listen to the Quakers’ listening was obtrusive and unwelcome and verging on the unethical. Fundamentally, we would not be sharing the same orientation for silence and listening as the rest of the congregation – a kind of eavesdropping on the silence of others. As a compromise at the end of the walk we met in the Friends Meeting House for a debrief, allowing us to dwell in the original starting point.

### **The Joy of Soundwalking**

Notwithstanding the health benefits of daily walking, and its accompanying boost of dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins, it can be a highly pleasurable activity. In his *A Philosophy of Walking*, Frédéric Gros, develops the *States of Well-Being* that the walking experience offers - “to different degrees, on different occasions,” as differentiated in the Antiquity - pleasure, joy, happiness, and serenity (Gros 2015: 139-46). For Hildegard Westerkamp, soundwalking affords the “practical purpose of orientation of the environment” or can have a “purely aesthetic purpose of creating a soundwalk” (Westerkamp 2007: 52), but much more than that, as shared or solitary daily practice, it is allied to the practice of meditation and mindfulness as it has the capacity for personal enrichment. On reflecting on many years of soundwalking practice – and resonating with Pauline Oliveros’ practice of *Deep Listening* (2005) – she appraises “soundwalking or any related ways of listening. Doing such a lifelong practice imbues a visceral, embodied knowledge of healing, calming, centering. It is in the doing that this knowledge emerges and the benefits are particularly relevant in this ever-increasing chaos and confusion of today’s world” (see the [acoustic-ecology@sfu.ca](mailto:acoustic-ecology@sfu.ca) discussion list, 31st May 2018).

The potential for collective walking and listening to induce calm is astonishing; at the end of the walk there is often a reluctance across the group to break the silence back into the customary verbal mode of exchange. I have led a soundwalk around Goldsmiths’ neighborhoods in South London every year for the past decade, a route that takes in a wide range of social and topographic contrast. At the debrief one year a student announced that he had never felt so relaxed. Despite the frenzied, and quantitatively loud and complex urban

environment that we had traversed, the walk had imbued him with an inner silence, cocooning him from the physical acoustic environment. At the end of another walk in a cold and wet November evening in Leeds, a participant extolled on the most amazing 3D surround sound experience; the walk had rendered his listening experience of the physical acoustic environment into a highly mediatized hyperreal mode, detached from the everyday. Yet the urban soundscape is not rarefied or meticulously controlled like cinema sound design: ultimately it is haphazard, generative, unwieldy, and inherently complex, and most importantly, all sounds are indexical.

### **Walkability**

I have observed some participants increasingly unable to block off the prevailing noise of the environment as walks have progressed. In feedback following a soundwalk of Plymouth city center I led for the Geographies of Creativity and Knowledge research group from Exeter University in January 2015, which included the participants' intensification of their sense of smell (interestingly not an uncommon response), performance maker and director Paula Crutchlow explained:

I was OK for a while and I was hearing things and following the source of the sound. Then it was the tuning in to listening to everything [that] made me feel anxious and overloaded. Like I could hear everything simultaneously. Not only hearing things coming from all directions, I felt like I needed to know where all the sounds were coming from and attach them to the source of the sound. I started to make up stories in my head for all the sounds and the snatches of conversation. In the end I felt like I was hearing everything all at once, coming from all directions, and loudly - which was overwhelming. It was only when we sat down to talk about it that I realised how challenging the experience had been. (email to the author, 6th September 2018)

Deliberating on this kind of dissonant reaction to soundwalking with Westerkamp, I learnt she recommends participants to take some timeout following a walk, postponing the plunge back into everyday life. To help foster a potentially nourishing relationship with the acoustic environment, Westerkamp is careful in her choice of soundwalk locations and routes: "It is best done in a place where we can hear ourselves and the more delicate sounds around us" (Westerkamp 2007: 52). Here there is pressing desire for a reorientation of urban soundscape design towards the human-auditory-scale in contrast to the preponderance of street design where the "needs of drivers and motor traffic [are] put first" (CABE 2008: 2). For Westerkamp, a judgement of human-scale can be simply the (in)ability to hear your voice or your footsteps due to masking: "You cannot hear the sounds you yourself produce, you experience a

soundscape out of balance. Human proportions have no meaning here” (Westerkamp 2007: 50).

Assessing the entirety of the human experience and behavior within cities, with an eye to prioritizing the pedestrian (and cyclist) in the urban environment, Gehl and his team carried out comparative walking tours. Soundscapes tend not to feature too highly in their observations and concerns, however he makes a similar qualitative evaluation to Westerkamp’s. On comparing “pedestrian-friendly” Venice with London, Tokyo or Bangkok, he pronounces: “It is possible to speak quietly and pleasantly with others. At the same time you can hear footsteps, laughter, snatches of conversation, singing from open windows and many other sounds of life in the city. Both the possibility to hold a conversation and the sound of human activity are important qualities” (Gehl 2010: 152).

Lamentably, the uncrowded Vienna soundscape throws the soundscape of most urban agglomerations into sharp relief, which can be overwhelmingly hostile, alienating, and “out of balance.” A briefing document by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) on *Civilised Streets* acknowledges that “most of our streets are not civilised, enjoyable places to be. They are mainly noisy, polluted, hazardous and unpleasant – with serious social and environmental problems the result” (CABE 2008: 2).

What much public realm is lacking can be best defined as “walkability.” Articulated by pioneering soundscape researcher, Michael Southworth, whose experimental research into accessibility and the senses included blindfolding participants – a method also carried out by Ben Patterson in *Tour* (New York, 1963) – and traversing them through urban environments on wheelchair, walkability is “the extent to which the built environment supports and encourages walking by providing for pedestrian comfort and safety, connecting people with varied destinations within a reasonable amount of time and effort, and offering visual [and aural] interest in journeys throughout the network” (Southworth 2005: 248).

Soundwalking in those auditory nourishing places is helpful in learning the lessons about what constitutes good soundscape design, but to ameliorate walkability throughout the city, we also need to venture into the more challenging urban spaces, to understand what needs to be worked on, and to evaluate what extant features can be valorized and maintained. But here we have another ethical quandary: is it ethical to promote sensitive listening to a populous who unavoidably inhabit a potential stressful fight or flight inducing (corticotropin-releasing hormone and adrenocorticotrophic hormone) noisy environment.

## **Conclusion**

As I have shown, soundwalking approaches lie on a spectrum between soundwalking as a means to an ends and soundwalking for soundwalking’s sake. Its methodology incorporates multiple practices of overlapping and divergent ideological, ontological, and epistemological underpinnings, the aims and objectives of which are inconsistent. Its form can be scrupulously

prescribed and intentionally proscriptive, or aping the tradition of the *dérive* (drift); it can be open, generative, and improvisational. Today's versions of soundwalking can be found in multiple disciplinary contexts with a polyphony of converging and diverging, spoken and unspoken set of aims and motivations, and as such engender themes of participation, social context, aesthetic listening, environmental sensitization, interpretation, pedagogy, awareness raising, deep mapping, psychogeographic musings, and more recently the professional field of acoustics (ISO 12913-1:2014). Whatever its orientation, soundwalking practices share the commonality of encouraging the prioritization of auditory perception(s) over the other senses outside of a lab setting, which might be understood as immersed in the everyday, the real world, in the field, or *in situ*. Hence it is inescapably and unashamedly context sensitive with all that may encompass. But it is not an activity that can be replaced. I would claim that if you have never participated in a soundwalk you will not be able to comprehend the profound experiential effect that an erstwhile prosaic activity can have.

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