

## Words and Sounds



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*On 14 January last, R. Murray Schafer passed away. The news of his passing reached us almost at the close of the present edition. Although written before his death, let this editorial serve as a tribute to his works, his teaching, and to a militancy which has sensitized and encourages us to continue thinking about his soundscapes.*

Reading a few articles published during the last years in the area of sound studies reveals the use of a surprising number of different expressions to name their main objects of study: sound phenomena, their means of perception, and the conditions in which they are produced. Although classifying those expressions turns out to be risky because of the reasons put forward below, it seems plausible to distribute them into three sets. One of them assembles those which name sound phenomena, such as: sound, sound object, sound event, soundscape, sound signal, sound substance, sound scene, audible phenomenon, acoustic matter, acoustic signal, acoustic territory, aural spectrum and noise. Another set groups together expressions which refer to the means or to the perception practices of the object, such as: listening, listening experience, listening act, techniques of listening, aural perception, aural device, sound perception, sound experience, sound imagery, aural perceptive experience, hearing, hearing phenomenon and acoustic experience. In a third set, expressions can be gathered referring to the framework or to the perception conditions of the object, such as: aural culture, sound culture, sound texture, aural regime, aural world, aurality, aurality conditions, acoustic culture, acoustic space, acoustic regime, listening regime, sound environment, audible environment and social construction of sound. The purpose of this brief piece of writing consists in kindling the discussion about the benefits and risks of thinking, researching and dialoguing in a field with such a terminological profusion, and in which neologisms, terms with little agreement on their meanings, polysemy, doubtful synonymy and some (or a lot of) poetics abound.

In almost all the articles consulted, which I intentionally avoid identifying, the expressions gathered in the paragraph above are part of their theoretical structure and of the strategies for delimiting and approaching their objects of study, that is, they are concepts which require being defined with relative precision and used in a consistent and coherent way so as not to cause a weakening or invalidation of the arguments and conclusions at which each author arrives.

In some papers, these concepts are defined *ad hoc*. In others, instead, previous definitions are referred to, some of which already have canonical status, as the expressions “soundscape” and “techniques of listening” entail, among others. We can also see that in some publications it occurs neither one thing nor the other, and the sense of the expressions must be deduced from the general contents of the text and by consulting other sources. Up to here, sound studies do not show a different scenario than other areas interested in music and sounds. However, it is surprising that quite often an author employs several of those expressions in the same publication to, apparently, designate only one phenomenon. For example, in an article the terms “sound event”, “sound scene”, and “soundscape” are found; in another, “listening”, “listening experience”, and “listening act”; and in another, “aurality conditions”, “acoustic regime”, and “listening regime”. In all these cases, it must be decided if the different expressions have a different conceptual load to signal dissimilar aspects or nuances of the same phenomenon, or if it is a case of synonymy. In turn, if it is a case of synonymy, it is necessary to know if it is the result of an uncontrolled use of language or of a stylistic resource to avoid reiterations. Without denying the existence of papers which are enormously precise and coherent about the use of terminology, sound studies currently constitute one of the most unstable areas in this regard. The use of canonical concepts does not always help to improve this scenario as many of them entail a considerable share of ambiguity, originated both at the moment of coining them and of re-using them. Such is the case of the concept “soundscape”, perhaps the one with the biggest presence in the area. As it was coined by Murray Schafer (2013), that concept harbours a double ambiguity: it designates both the sounds of a space –rural or urban– and a musical work, and, in its first meaning, it designates both a phenomenon alien to the construction of the subjects who inhabit it –a polluted soundscape which it is necessary to clean up, according to its creator– and a phenomenon which is constructed by the subjects who occupy it through listening – which is why pollution is not an a priori thing but a state open to dispute. This initial ambiguity laid the foundations for a multiplicity of uses which put the concept on the verge of being meaningless or, in the best of cases,

devalue its denominative capacity as, with so much imprecision, any sound phenomenon is susceptible of being named and studied as “soundscape”.

The causes of this superabundance of terms and of the conceptual ambiguity of some of them seem to be found in the lack of sedimentation and maturation of a common vocabulary due to the young age of this area of study,<sup>1</sup> and in the interdisciplinary contexture that it has been progressively acquiring, which has generated an unstable paradigm of expressions stemming from very different lexical fields. These lexical fields are usually those which assist sound studies: (ethno) musicology, acoustics, popular music studies, history, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, etc. Also, the competitive character which prevails in several academic spaces, leads us to try and coin concepts, without this involving an innovative semantic contribution in relation to already existing concepts.

This profusion of expressions and the low level of agreement with respect to their meanings may cause some distress to those looking for precise definitions and those trying to fully understand the ideas expressed in texts. Perhaps it is enough to portrait this situation by saying that an acoustics engineer would feel very disorientated when trying to understand the differences between some of the above mentioned expressions, in spite of acoustics being one of the disciplines which contribute several terms and procedures to sound studies. Then, which are the benefits and inconveniences that this scenario presents? Undoubtedly, thinking, researching, and dialoguing in an ambiguous field in which signifier and signified swarm and are decoupled is a challenge worth accepting as it is usually an exercise which sharpens observation, calls certainties into question and pushes the inquiry horizon further. Besides, an area rich in expressions provides a comfortable and extensive space to the poetic dimension of texts, which has constituted, at least since the emergence of cultural studies, an important dimension of knowledge generation. However, the challenge this scenario poses has many risks. Apart from the inconveniences already mentioned, moving in a terminological and conceptual quagmire obstructs perspective comparison and, to a certain extent, may depreciate the area in comparison with others which operate with more preciseness and wider consensus levels. Nowadays, a “state of the question” of sound studies which intends to be thorough and not superficial is something complex to be carried out because it requires comparing and

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<sup>1</sup> The beginning of what today is known as sound studies can be traced back to the late 1940s with the research of Pierre Schaeffer. The start of an expansion process, with regard to quantity of publications and thematic diversity, occurred in the 1990s.

foster dialogue between different texts; but none of this can be effective if the parties to that dialogue speak different languages. The terminological and conceptual diversity generates incommensurability or, in the best of cases, introduces noise in communication.

Neither an expressive and conceptual normalization nor a reduction in the terminological paradigm is being advocated here, but the raising of a debate on the dangers of writing and thinking about sound neglecting the use of words, or letting the poetic dimension devour the communicational dimension which our texts must necessarily have. Beyond any linguistic relativism, an understanding is necessary, a fairly transparent communication, a speech of attenuated noise, not for the writing and reading horizons to be placidly fused together, but for discussions and genuine criticism to grow. As it has been said, sound studies constitute one of the areas interested in sound phenomena which show the most profusion of terms and instability of meanings. But another close area, emerging and experiencing rapid growth, is beginning to move in that same direction: the one interested in the production, circulation, and consumption of music in the virtual environment. Within it, neologisms appear, old terms are resemantized, grammaticalization of words from one language occurs in another, lexical fields from different disciplines converge and, very often, central concepts are employed in an ambiguous way. Here is one more challenge questioning us with haste.

## Bibliography

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- » Schafer, R. M. (2013 [1977]). *El paisaje sonoro y la afinación del mundo*. Barcelona: Intermedio.