

Sonic Notes from a Taipei Noodle Restaurant

by Julian H. Scaff (with contributions from Tsui-lun Liu)

1. In early March, 2006 I visited an artist in Taipei, Taiwan named Tsui-lun Liu. As we walked down Tingzhou Road my senses repelled the assault of automobile and scooter noise, air pollution, and humidity. As we passed by a market I flipped my thumb against the metro "Easy Card" in my pocket, and the rhythm seemed to shut out all the chaos and in my head I heard only Tsui-lun's sound work 'Good Torture' in which she softly chants "Good torture, bad torture, Legal torture, Illegal torture, Sweet torture, bitter torture..." etc. The piece is exactly the opposite of this street. This street is a cantankerous and turbulent storm of noise, yet the city has a soft humming underbelly. In 'Good Torture' Tsui-lun's voice is delicate, haunting, yet the meanings of the words scream and wail far louder than this street.

2. I was having lunch with Tsui-lun in a restaurant called Golden Triangle, a very small imbiss located on a small alley near National Taiwan University. She recommended the Golden Triangle River Rice Noodles, so that's what I got. We also get the soup, made of beef bouillon, tomatoes, fried onions and a lot of other ingredients I do not know. It tastes a little bit spicy and combined with the humidity I am sweating by the time I finish it. Whenever I lean on the table, one of the legs which is shorter than the others causes it to tilt slightly, creating a creaking sound like an elm tree wrapped in silk bowing under the weight of a winter snow.

3. It was my understanding that in Taiwan, unlike Japan, you are not supposed to slurp your noodles. However, an older couple across the restaurant are slurping with gusto. Are they Japanese? I ask Tsui-lun. No, she says, it's an age thing. The older generation who grew up under Japanese rule slurp their noodles, while the younger generation view it as being old fashioned. Perhaps in ten to twenty years slurping will have all but vanished from the Taipei sonosphere.

4. My attention turns to the kitchen. The Golden Triangle, just like most of imbisses in Taiwan, has its main kitchen outside. Crashes of metal cooking pots are jumbled with the sounds of frying oil, running water, the clangs of cutlery, and the jingling of coins. The filmmaker Oskar Fischinger once said to John Cage "Everything in the world has its own

spirit which can be released by setting it into vibration." The kitchen is a symphony of vibration. I can shut it out by shifting my locus of attention, but I cannot prevent its effects on my brain. I can defocus it, but not erase it.

5. Among the percussive sounds emanating from the kitchen is the sound of a radio. I can discern zig-zaggy lines of static that create sonic stripes through the broadcast. The interference is of such a distinctive quality that I wonder if there is a 'Taos Hum' here that is causing it? The 'Taos Hum' is a low-pitched sound heard in many places around the world, but it has been particularly documented in the United States, UK, and northern Europe. It can only be heard in quiet environments, but it can affect television and radio broadcasts, usually creating grey diagonal stripes across the television screen. It is often described as sounding like a distant diesel engine. Its source and exact nature is still a mystery since it has proven to be undetectable by microphones or VLF antennae. In the noise of such a city it would be impossible to hear, but would be detectable on televisions and radios.

6. A large vehicle drives by. I don't see it but I hear it. It is obviously generated sound vibrations below 20 hertz, which are referred to as subsonic sound waves which cannot be heard but can be felt. Such sounds are not picked up by the ear, but by the entire body. The body is an ear for subsonic vibrations.

7. Acoustic instruments demonstrate that extreme high and low frequency sounds deflect and bounce off of floors, walls, and ceilings causing fluctuations in the air, called natural reverberation. The body can undergo a number of different physiological changes depending upon the precise frequency of the reverberation and the size and nature of the space.

8. When a sound reverberation of a constant frequency occurs within a space, it can form an invisible pattern of reflecting sound waves called "standing waves." While standing waves can occur at almost any frequency, they most commonly occur with subsonic and hypersonic frequencies. Like an invisible three-dimensional web of sound, the lines of inaudible frequencies cross one another creating new harmonic waves. These areas of crossing harmonics are the standing waves, whereas the spaces in between the waves are called

null points. As I get up to go to the toilet, I realize that there is a standing wave right next to our table. As I pass through it I experience a brief pulsating sensation.

9. Tsui-lun is also sweating from the warm, humid air and the spicy soup. The loudest sound in the restaurant are the shouts of the waiters and waitresses yelling orders to the cooks outside, the constant buzzing of scooters is like being inside a giant bee hive, and in my legs I detect the rumble of the metro, yet Tsui-lun's "Ahhh" exclamation after drinking some bottled water is still audible. How am I able to discern this small, subtle sound amidst the cacaphony? How, in the chaotic milieu of a city, am I able to decode the sonosphere?

10. The analysis and interpretation of sonospheres is a complex human ability. I see a blind woman walk by the restaurant with a white cane. The cane sweeps back and forth, determining a clear path in front of her, but I imagine that she must have a rich and detailed sound-image in her head of this urban space. Even the tiniest echoes and vibrations help to identify sonic and physical space.

11. We can also pinpoint the position of a sound in space by using what is called an ear-body-brain combination to interpret localization cues. These are grouped into two distinctive categories: dynamic cues (such as vision, reverberation, head motion, and early echo response), and static cues (such as head shadow, shoulder echo, interaural time difference, and pinna response). An example of dynamic cues would be the recognition of sounds that occur close to us by the fact that they produce fewer echos. The pinna response, a static cue, is the ability of the outer ear to filter out specific frequencies of sound depending upon the direction from which the sound is generated. Behind me another older couple is slurping their noodles, and my pinna filters out the 1,000 herz frequencies. This subtle change in the quality of the sound allows me to perceive that the slurping of noodles is occurring behind me.

12. Walter J. Ong wrote in his book *Orality and Literacy* the visual world is a world of objects, whereas the auditory world is a world of events. I see the older couple across the restaurant and I hear them slurping their noodles, but what I perceive are a man and a woman in their mid to late fifties. The man is wearing khaki trousers and a black polo shirt and the woman wearing a creme-colored ankle-length skirt and a red short-sleeved

blouse. They both are wearing glasses that are too big for their faces. In other words, I perceive them as objects. However, the slurping that I just heard behind me is not perceived as an object because I can't see it. I know that it is probably an older person or a Japanese tourist by the fact that they are slurping, but the slurping itself has no visual reference and thus is perceived as an event in time. And while the quality of the sound filtered by my pinna allows me to perceive that the sound is originating from behind me, phenomenologically I am not "hearing" a sound wave but rather an event that is mutually dependent with the dynamics of the present moment.

13. Some time later after returning from Taiwan, I was collecting audio samples in a predominantly Indian neighborhood of Tooting Broadway in London when I happened across a Hare Krishna restaurant. In addition to serving a broad range of delicious vegetarian curries including eggplant, okra, and papaya, it also turned out to be a good location to sit back and listen to my recordings, as well as contemplate the universe of sound. The combination of clanging pots and pans in the kitchen, almost constant drumming and percussion (pre-recorded and live), and occasional spontaneous chanting and dancing creates a rich sonosphere in this place.

14. The Hare Krishnas suggested to me that cooling off spicier foods with a salad of cucumbers and carrots in yogurt will not only return balance to the palette but will also sharpen the ability to listen. I'll test this theory later on during my meal.

15. While eating some saag (punjab style spinach) I was contemplating William J. Mitchell's observation that pixels in digital images are signifiers whose meaning increases as the number of pixels increases (Mitchell, 1992). He writes that "A single pixel, taken in isolation, depicts nothing in particular--merely a 'light thing' or 'dark thing.' But when a pixel is seen in context with other pixels, which narrow the range of likely interpretations, then its significance becomes more precise." This can be applied to sound waves as well. One "pixel" of sound, one small unit of time out of the sound wave or bit of information in the digital signal conveys very little information. The more sonic pixels that are heard the more information is delivered, for all the bits of information in the wave are interdepend-

ent. In a soundscape, however, too much information becomes noise, and information is lost.

16. It is well known that vitamin A is vital to many bodily functions, including hearing. Research suggests that a vitamin A deficiency can decrease sensitivity to sound and at the same time increase the susceptibility to noise. Vitamin B has also been shown to help prevent hearing loss, especially due to aging. Vitamin E is a powerful antioxidant that increases blood flow throughout the body, and has been shown to increase alpha-linolenic acid which is essential for the auditory brainstem responses. The Hare Krishna cooks informed me that vitamin A is found in bright orange, yellow, and green vegetables such as radishes, asparagus, pumpkins, carrots, and cabbage. Vitamin B is found in milk products, eggs, yeast extracts (such as Marmite), and soy. Vitamin E can be found in vegetable oils, nuts, green leafy vegetables, and some fruits such as wheat germ oil, almonds, peanut butter, spinach, broccoli, kiwi, and mango. So, to improve your sense of hearing and prevent hearing loss, add these foods to your diet. (See <http://www.mothenature.com/Library/Bookshelf/Books/10/111.cfm>).

17. The Krishnas really have a point about the cucumber carrot yogurt salad. I just had some to cool my tongue off after eating some spicy mattar paneer (peas with punjabi cheese) and I feel my sense of hearing focusing in a way. I can focus on the sounds at my own table and in a way block out the noise in the rest of the restaurant, creating my own sonic interior space. Jonathan Sterne points out that the development of audile technique (technique of listening) is one of the essential parts of the modern history of sound (Sterne, 2003). He observes that "Techniques of listening instrumentalized and promoted physical distance and epistemological and social mediation." Thus, when I practice a particular listening technique such as focusing on the sounds of my eating utensils and the cling of the glass of my mango lassie, I am practicing a technique tied to westernized notions of logic and rationality that construct acoustic space as a private space.

18. The Krishnas in the kitchen break into chanting. I focus on it, but by doing so I become defocused. My body blurs, but something else in my consciousness sharpens. When my waiter walks by I ask him for another mango lassie and what the point of the chanting is? He says "The transcendental vibration established by the chanting of Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama

Hare Hare is the sublime method for reviving our transcendental consciousness." That reminds me of something Kodwo Eshun wrote about a synth-vocal group called Fingers Inc which asks "Can you feel it. 'It' here is emotion without an object, pointless, careless, directionless feeling for it's own sake. Fingers Inc. demands that you feel feeling" (Eshun, 1998). Sound is the only sensation powerful enough to evoke emotion without object, to feel feeling itself. Vision, touch, smell, and taste don't do it. That's why the Hare Krishnas chant, and that's why Fingers Inc. makes music.

19. Outside the drumbeat of rain begins to envelope the sounds inside the restaurant. A poem by Octavio Paz comes to mind, *A Concert in the Garden*: "It rained. / The hour is an enormous eye. / Inside it, we come and go like reflections. / The river of music / enters my blood. / If I say body, it answers wind. / If I say earth, it answers where? // The world, a double blossom, opens: / sadness of having come, / joy of being here. // I walk lost in my own center." Why do I think of this poem? Because more than almost any other poem it conjures up sounds more than images for me. Despite lines like "The hour is an enormous eye" and "we come and go like reflections" this is for me a powerfully acoustic poem. Music is a river that enters the body, the body is as ethereal as the wind, and the earth cannot be found. The visual world is a world of objects, while the acoustic world is a world of events, and this is a poem of events devoid of objects, a poem of interior, introspective acoustic space.

20. As I observe the cinema of the absurd unfolding around me--Hare Krishnas bustling about with trays of food, occasionally erupting into chanting and dancing, the cacophony of noise from the kitchen, neo-hippies, businessmen on their lunch breaks, university students, and pseudo-intellectuals looking for a cheap meal--I think about the visual and auditory space of the restaurant in terms of cinematic or digital space. Lev Manovich argues that whereas cinema has historically favored temporality, the digital media favor spaciality (Manovich, 2001). However, sound has always been as much about space as time. Music may be more temporal than spacial, but non-musical sound and noise is by far more spatial. Just watch a scene from *À Bout de Souffle* by Jean-Luc Godard of the two protagonists walking around Paris. Watch it with no sound. Watch it with sound. Then just listen to the sound with no picture. The sound with the image and the sound alone will give the greatest feeling of space. The picture alone only communicates objects moving in time.

21. As the Krishnas break into another bout of chanting and drumming, I focus this time on the drumming. Far below the range of normal human hearing the drums are producing waves that can be felt in the legs and stomach. It can be observed on the surface of the water in a glass. The entire body is sensitive to vibration, and therefore the entire body can hear. For instance, in the 1970's the sound and music researcher R. Murray Schafer did experiments with students in both North America and Germany in which the students were coaxed into a state of deep relaxation and then played various notes. Afterwards they were asked to identify the notes they heard. The North American students best remembered the note B natural, whereas the German students best remembered the note G sharp. Schafer discovered that in North America the electrical current in buildings ran at 60 cycles per second, corresponding to the pitch in B natural, while in Germany the electrical current ran at 50 cycles per second, equivalent to the pitch of G sharp. This suggested that the electrical current in the buildings was tuning people's brains like an instrument. (See *The Tuning of the World*, 1977, by R. Murray Schafer.) I wonder how the electricity in this building is tuning us, and if the Krishna's drumming is re-tuning us?

22. I finish my fourth mango lassie, pay for my meal and get up to leave. My private acoustic space that I created at my table through my auditory listening technique is gone. I now move through multiple acoustic spaces, but I note that they are not distinct spaces. They flow together. Only when I walk through a door or behind a wall is the change abrupt. David Toop suggests "To move through the city without any clear aim, capturing dispersed sounds on the fly, registering the fluidity and chaos of an urban audio dynamism that evades bureaucratic and commercial control; this is closer to the strange invisible space that now overlays the physical dimension, an absorption into the collective drama of random events and behaviors that flows through the streets" (Toop, 2004). And so I set out on a sonic *dérive*, shunning the private, privileged acoustic spaces formed by audile technique, and instead wander through the sonosphere collecting more random, dispersed sonic footnotes.