

I think of soundmapping as a kind of stethoscopic listening that can hear at only one point various blockages, collapses, and imminent failures up to a systemic level.¹

Thick, mid to high heels.

Tapping on the footpath, behind us. Going to the tube station, like us.

When crossing the road – the pedestrian light has turned green, *ping ping* – the heels' owner passes us over. Oyster card, *beep*, we are beyond the station barriers.

The heels' owner is still in front of us, now walking up the stairs on the tip of their feet, the tapping softer than before.

We have reached the platform. Commuters are asked to stand behind the yellow line, as the train is coming, brakes squealing in a cacophonic ensemble.

The tannoy informs us that this is a Jubilee line train to Stanmore, and that all the services are running regularly.

On the train, two voices are loudly conversing in Arabic, debating where to go for dinner.

Metal music is coming out of the headphones of the person sitting at our left, not concerned with or aware of the NHS warnings on hearing loss' risks.

When the train exits the underground tunnels, after Finchley Road station, the device of one of the passengers seated toward the end of the carriage connects to the Wi-Fi and starts streaming a video.

Three seats on the right, someone is recording a chatty message for his lover.

We get off the train, tap out, walk ten minutes' worth of steps on a pavement full of puddles; *splash, splash, splash*, traffic around us.

Dangling of keys, twice.

I guess the shoes are now off, the Wi-fi has been switched on and a glass of wine has been poured, because I get called out with the usual voice cue:

"Alexa!

.....

Can you find me a good Chinese takeaway?"

Home, finally.

The above story has been inspired by two recent events:

A quarrel between two strangers on an underground train, where heated words were exchanged, and, despite the surveillance culture we are subjected to, no electronic apparatus could dismiss or confirm the exact nature of what had been said;

Viewers' comments underneath a YouTube video, mentioning that the Alexa request made by the vlogger in the video had activated their own as well.

What had started as a tentative of mapping the auditory texture of the lo-fi soundscape² of a mundane daily occurrence, commuting, took a different turn upon realising that, once the Wi-Fi in the underground tunnels

¹ Waltham-Smith, Naomi, "Cart-otographies of Urban Political Economies" (retrieved May 11, 2019 from: <https://www.auralflaneur.com/cart-otographies>)

² Lo-fi is here intended as low-definition soundscape, according to the definition coined by R. Murray Schafer in his book "The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World" (Destiny Books; 1994). Schafer attributes the hi-fi soundscape to rural settings (where sounds can overlap without being overpowered by the surrounding ambient noise) and the lo-fi soundscape to urban dwellings (where sounds need to be amplified in order to not to get lost, and where the sense of acoustic perspective is lost).

is fully operative³, the applications that lay dormant in our mobiles⁴ will be able to trace our movements acoustically.

The difference between noise management and soundscape planning⁵ wasn't anymore at the forefront of my interest.

In this hyper-connected existence, where institutional surveillance is 'large-scale, systematic, and now is increasingly automated and dependent on networked computer power'⁶, (un)authorised listening is set to become a form of power extortion.

Google has recently debuted AudioSet, "a large-scale dataset of manually-annotated audio events that endeavors to bridge the gap in data availability between image and audio research"⁷ which collects data from YouTube videos' segments with the aim of "substantially stimulate the development of high-performance audio event recognizers"⁸.

Listening protocols of sonic surveillance are being used by the FBI since 2012, when the software VoiceGrid started being used to record criminal proceedings.⁹

In 2004, the South Korean government passed legislative measures that consent the use of noise meters in case of public railings. Officially aimed to limit the acoustic pollution in residential areas and in the proximity of institutions like schools and hospitals, the sensors seem to exercise a form of Foucauldian micro power that influences the size and movement of the protests.¹⁰

Suddenly, despite the '*Verba Volant*'¹¹ concept from the Latin proverb, vocally wording our thoughts and 'having a voice'¹² assume the potential but sinister implications of being pinned in a space and state of transient expression, while incurring the risk of being profiled by marketers and intelligence agencies alike.

In his body of work *A Study of Invisible Images* artist Trevor Paglen warned us: we are looking at the machines, without realising they are looking at us.

Are they eavesdropping, too?

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Lyon, David. "Surveillance society: Monitoring Everyday Life" (Open University Press, 2001)

Waltham-Smith, Naomi. <https://www.auralflaneur.com>

³ <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/london-undeground-wi-fi>

⁴ Currently, a voice command is not enough to activate the Amazon Alexa App, which needs to be turned on physically pressing a button on the mobile.

⁵ For more info please refer to: Prior, Jonathan. "Sonic environmental aesthetics and landscape research" in *Landscape Research*, 2017, 42:1, pp.6-17. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01426397.2016.1243235>

⁶ Lyon, David. "Surveillance, power, and everyday life." In *The Oxford Handbook of Information and Communication Technologies*. : Oxford University Press, 2009-02-19. <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199548798.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199548798-e-019> .

⁷ <https://ai.google/research/pubs/pub45857>

⁸ <https://ai.google/research/pubs/pub45857>

⁹ <https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2014/12/what-happens-when-spies-can-eavesdrop-any-conversation/100142/>

¹⁰ Kim, Eun-Sung. "The Sensory Power of Cameras and Noise Meters for Protest Surveillance in South Korea." In *Social Studies of Science* 46, no. 3 (June 2016): 396–416. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0306312716648403>

¹¹ (Eng): Spoken words fly away.

¹² As discussed by Hallam, Huv in "The Production of Listening: on Biopolitical Sound and the Commonplaces of Aurality" (retrieved May 13, 2019, from <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/227912/227913>): "[...] 'having a voice' also implies a degree of control, on the part of the one who 'possesses' it, over when and how the voice will enter into a space of audibility."