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by Lorraine Plourde

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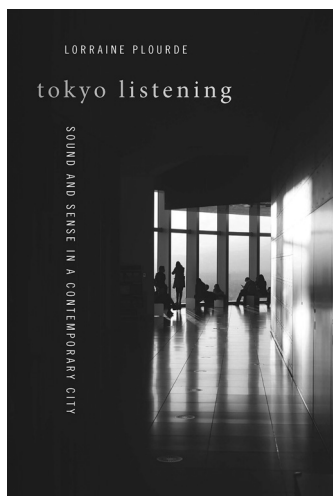
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*Tokyo Listening: Sound and Sense  
in a Contemporary City*

by Lorraine Plourde

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Tokyo, the land of chimeras. The mind of the ordinary European finds itself confused, dreaming of distant, improbable Asian realms, avalanche of sundry thoughts. He imagines adventures and sensations. Projects fears and curiosities in a multi-coloured mix of fragments of film and Japanese prints. Craves both fearfully and optimistically new experiences which the intangible of the territory too far away could facilitate upon a possible confrontation.

For Lorraine Plourde, the encounter with Tokyo took place 17 years ago. The attraction stole in her being so perplexedly that it took a second, a third, an umpteenth experience to concretise an almost organic relation between the writer and the territory of her wonderings. Starting from a multiple research, an investigation of the sensorial resources which bring people together or decisively separate them, Plourde stepped down into an ethnographic, ethnomusicologic, social and psychological quest resulting in a five-movement work: an overture-like introduction, three interludes and a conclusion – *Tokyo Listening*. The investigation of “sound and sense in a contemporary city” reveals that “Tokyo is a richly dense and overwhelming sonic environment on which auditory practices are cultivated”.

Even from the first pages, the journey that Lorraine Plourde suggests announces itself as mysterious. Coming from a realm of contrasts, both

ordered and of a paroxysmal diversity, sound has a right of appeal no matter its source. Gliding between chimeric attempts to limit the presence of sonorities and thematic echoes of the various practices and customs filling the streets of some neighbourhood, we discover the tie between “listening practices and the city soundscape”. The almost organic presence of sounds – random or controlled – on the streets or in the buildings of Tokyo cannot be ripped apart or understood separately. They may be part of a program meant to inspire productivity or to incite buyers to choose certain items, or they may be just regular daily noise – the result is one “intensely corporeal and mysteriously immaterial”. Inhabitants and tourists slip in a chaotic medium, phonically loaded, a very dense sonic environment close to saturation and with effects similar to those of air pollution. “People do not take in sound simply through our ears, but through our bodies as well”, writes Plourde, the contact with sound thus becoming an “intensely corporeal process”. Even if suggestions of that orderly Japanese society seem strict, demanding that the participants to the quotidian life in the metropole “control [their] sonic leakage”, the presence of sounds is overwhelming, a combination of the most diverse echoes.

Wanting to discover alternative musical sound sources of Tokyo society rush, Lorraine Plourde chooses three versions of acoustic manifest which Europeans seem to disseminate on different parameters: “experimental music venues, music cafés and retail and work spaces targeted by background music”.

The story of *Off Site*, a stage dedicated to something generically called *Onkyō* (sound), proves to be the history of an “experimental music venue” famous in its time (it closed down in 2004), another medium for experimental music. Located in a completely white, cubical, thin-walled flat with a minimalist décor, *Off Site* presupposed an almost physical confrontation between listeners and artists, due to the extremely concentrated space. Events caused both complete silence on the part of the audience and a reduction to a minimum of the sound source volume. Participants had therefore to strain their attention to a maximum before they were able to catch the sonic experiments unfolding before them, and these were often blended with or even muffled by daily noises of life happening outside and jumping at them through the paper-thin walls: a bicycle, cars honking, voices speaking. . . . After such an effort, the participants’ hearing would emerge so refined that they would afterwards re-enter the daily routine capable of catching the finest shades of the surrounding reality, until then unnoticed.

In direct contrast, in *music cafés* one could glide back in the outdated and weathered décor of the past. In a time of loneliness when the numerical excess of individuals erects walls of lack of empathy and sentences us to solitude,

a taking of refuge behind headphones or phone screens ensures the apparent comfort of hiding inside oneself. Behind glass doors, from armchairs they outgrew – initially destined to contain in their arms Asians from several centuries ago and which reportedly had other dimensions than the people of today – the owners of *music cafés* created a safe zone. LPs intone famous tunes in canonical performances. The only contemporary accent resides in the oversized speakers turned at full volume. In complete silence, the audience merges with the frenetic the roar of the music – “a bodily sensation”, with the corporeality of interaction supplementing the audition. This is a space where “time moves slowly”, where the solid wood flooring and the elaborate embroidery bring “the experience sonic patina in a distinctly tactile manner”. The voluntary slip into disuse is a painful appeal to nostalgia, the lamentation of a hesitating human race to the lost, long gone times of grace.

I discovered so far two breakouts, opposed behaviour-wise but sharing the same resultant – the identification of a medium of experience in which aural sensations (we can call them music, noise, sound, experiment . . .) are strained to a maximum, gliding towards a state of synaesthesia, and contemplation of the self.

The third interlude is dedicated to a seemingly harmless zone but which as analysed by Lorraine Plourde gains a worrying dimension – that of BGM (background music). Behind this apparently innocent music which accompanies us while we shop, on the elevator, on the street, in restaurants or elsewhere, Plourde unearths the industry of emotional blackmail. The proper aural, inconspicuous background can determine in the potential client or the employee the reaction that the salesperson or the employer had intended: manipulation. Generically called *Muzak*, this dimension needs an aural background to create the proper mood disregarding the doubtful quality of the aural substance pouring in our ears. Meant to appease and emotionally balance (“a mental balance for workers”), it functions on the principle that if “people are energized, business is energized”. Nevertheless, often the suicidal tendencies of employers worked to the limit of their endurance rise to over 30%, and the stimulation of productivity as studied on soldiers proved beneficial to the business community but with devastating effects on the human psyche, so easily manipulated.

If *Onkyō* educates the listeners towards “sound texture, gaps and silence”, building “a ubiquitous and distracted listening into an attentive or serious attention towards sound and space”, *Muzak* implies a sublayer of music destined to induce a voluntary, pretentious state of mind while remaining unobtrusive.

*Tokyo Listening* reveals to the reader a universe mainly foreign to us Europeans. Deafened by the acoustic excess of the miraculous city, people, hidden inside various music genres, are looking right there for their own answer. This study helps you learn that you can stop the whirlwind of a fast-moving society by resorting to a sound which will this time lead to what is familiar, and apt to impose a standing back from all that invades us, against our will, from the outside. Lorraine Plourde discovered the fascination and the patience to go inside the zone of psychological intimacy offered by the flight from sound in sound; a behaviour to which the inhabitants of this raging metropole created to a certain extent distinct and unique answers, uniting yesterday with today and hoping for tomorrow.

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