



Royal Holloway Geography for Schools Lecture Series

Sound and the Sense of Place

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Sound might ‘sound’ like a strange or unusual topic for a geographer, as geography is an overwhelmingly visual discipline. However, sounds form an important part of the human experience and, as such, they can offer interesting insights into the nature and meaning of places and processes of place-making at different scales.

In this lecture we consider:

1. The difference between key terms such as **space** and **place**.
2. How sounds contribute to create a ‘**sense of place**’, a deep emotional connection between people and places. Here Raymond Murray Schafer’s concepts of ‘**soundscape**’ (a portion of the sonic environment as perceived by humans) and ‘**soundmark**’ (a sound in a soundscape specially regarded by a community) can be helpful to explore these processes.
3. How different **typologies of sounds** transform places in different ways. These can range from music (as an art or a spontaneous phenomenon, like busking, but also as a commercial strategy used to manipulate places and human behaviours, e.g. background music in supermarkets and shopping malls) to noise (for example, traffic noise), or its absence.
4. How **silence** can also transform places. If sound is energy and movement, silence is stillness. But is there such a thing like absolute silence? To many, Covid lockdowns revealed sounds we would not otherwise pay attention to, as normally masked by louder sounds.
5. How sounds can change their **meaning** and function over time (for example, how navigational devices like foghorns and fog sirens turned from disruptive sounds for local communities into beloved soundmarks).
6. How, like place, certain sounds can have different meanings for different groups of people co-inhabiting the same places or can be **contested** between different groups. Examples include 1980s ‘Acid Music’ parties in abandoned warehouses and protests by local neighbours. They also include soundmarks such as church bells, Muslim calls for prayer and Jewish ritual songs in cities like Jerusalem. Like landmarks in the landscape, these sounds are projections in space of different groups and identities. Unlike vision, sound transcends physical **boundaries**, including the boundaries

between **private and public space**, and 'leak' into different places. This leakage can cause contestation and conflict between different groups.

7. How sound can offer an alternative way into the study of phenomena such as **globalization**. Unlike in past centuries, sounds are no longer anchored to specific places, but travel around through different media and contribute to the making of new complex multicultural identities and places.