

Acoustic Ecology Considered as a Connotation: Semiotic, Post-colonial and Educational Views of Soundscape

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I. Phono-centrism and Metaphysics

Jacque Derrida criticized Cartesian metaphysical view of philosophy as logo-centrism. Derrida thinks that logos is merely a monologue criticized as phonocentrism. Phonocentrism suggests that when one speaks something, her speech should express exactly the same contents as she intends to say, that is to say, there is no difference between speech and writing. Derrida (1978, pp.279-278) writes:

The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix—if you will pardon me for demonstrating so little and for being so elliptical in order to come more quickly to my principal theme—is the determination of being as presence in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence— *eidos*, *arche*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia*, (essence, existence, substance, subject) *altheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth.

European philosophy always listens to its own voice. This monologue seeks a desire for the unification, explained by the terms “A=A.” “A=A” is the concept which seeks identity among difference, for example, the concept of “a human = a human” expresses that a human being is always a human being even if one looks like a hoodlum, and this concept of “A=A” comes from a particular value named “cogito.” Therefore, the concept of “A=A” secretly introduces the concept of humanity. Derrida (1980) also argues that all language, because of a surplus over any exact reference leaves the reader and listener free to interpret because of the vagueness of the relationship between signifier and signified. European

metaphysics seeks solid foundation for language, that is to say, an original meaning, which is spoken, can precisely be written. Therefore this writing (*écriture*) actually says exactly the same thing as the original meaning of the speech. In Saussurian linguistics, attention is paid to speech events (*parole*). Derrida criticized it as phono-centrism and removes the center of Saussurian linguistics from speech events to writing (*écriture*). Derrida (1976, p.78) explained:

The privilege of the phone does not depend upon a choice that might have been avoided. It corresponds to moment of the system (let us say, of the “life” of “history or of “being-as-self-relationship”). The system of “hearing/understanding-oneself-speak” through the phonic substance—which presents itself as a non-exterior, non-empirical or non-contingent signifier—has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, arising from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and non-ideality, universal and non-universal, transcendental and empirical, etc.

Naess (1998), for example, proposed the concept of deep ecology, which has no objective/ subjective distinctions, and all human beings can instinctively and spontaneously experience it. His concept is quite similar to Norm Chomsky’s linguistic theory. Chomsky (1966) proposed the concept of deep structure, which all human beings innately universally have as one of the internal organs. However, both “deep ecology” and “deep structure” have never been found yet. If anything we might merely listen to Naess’ monologue after all, and should not expect any fundamental ecological truth. Needless to say, any cultural symbol or heritage is not genetically inherited, (e.g., Levi-Strauss, 1968). Thus, we cannot share the same acoustic environment where everybody universally feels comfortable. We may be able to find some commonalities in terms of acoustic environments and people’s perceptions. However, we

should take a look at their socio-cultural settings very carefully. We need to learn what deconstruction, cultural history, narratology, and feminist theory have to offer even in acoustic ecology as well as soundscape (Said, 1991, xvi).

Umbert Eco (1972, p.383) says:

If the ultimate structure exists, it cannot be defined; no metalanguage can ever capture it—because if it can be discovered, it is no longer ultimate.

How can we understand or even compare soundscape which has totally different histories and contexts? In non-Western cultures, there is presumably no concept of Western acoustic ecology or soundscape at all. Can we simply abstract a "sound structure," of which Western people make sense, from non-Western sound cultures? And can we accept the structure as a universal of acoustic ecology or soundscape ignoring all the evidence of differences? We can possibly have some sense of universals of acoustic ecology or soundscape from a European or North American perspective. However, if it does not apply to non-Western sophistication (if people in the non-West do not need to seek the nature of universals of acoustic ecology or soundscape at all), a universal of acoustic ecology itself would be European and North American cultural product in a certain particular period.

People in Japan, for example, used the word "music" as soon as Western musical influence came to Japan in early twentieth century (Tanaka, et al, 1986). In ancient times, music meant the foreign instrumental sounds which were mostly from Korea and China. Simultaneously, people in ancient Japan called their own music "singing and dancing," "playing" and "sound of a thing." That is to say, the ancient Japanese people thought about various sounds not only as acoustic phenomena but also as cultural and religious events, existing in a more inclusive socio-cultural context. The traditional way of listening in Japan involves a sort of amalgam of environmental sound, instrumental sound and any other environmental facts. In short, cultures do not share the same methods of listening, that is to say, there are as many ways of listening as there are cultures and ears.

II. Roland Barthes' semiotics

Saussurian linguistics (1966) focuses on abstracting the "universal system" (e.g., the concept of signifier and signified) which can apply to all languages around the world. Semiotics, however, extends Saussurian linguistic theory to decode socio-

cultural systems as a system of meaning, that is to say, semiotics is an apparatus to analyze socio-cultural phenomena as the structure of meaning. Semiotics assumes that language is not merely a tool for communication but also for creating any other communicative apparatuses such as music, advertisements, foods, objects, clothes and so on. Roland Barthes (1968) started off as a structuralist and coded everything into semiotics systems of signs and signifiers from fashion, to poetry, striptease, hamburgers and advertising, in the manner of Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss. But for Barthes, the sign draws attention to its own arbitrariness, which does not want to be natural, and in the act of conveying communicates its own relative and artificial status as well as signified. His reasoning is political. Signs which are "natural" are also authoritarian and ideological because ideologies seek to make social reality "natural (e.g. saluting the flag, western democracy represents the true meaning of the word freedom)." Barthes sees such things as contemporary mythologies. He thinks that all signs are ambiguous, capable of many different interpretations, but this does not mean they are all limitless, but it does mean they are not fixed in meaning. Barthes (1973) also illustrated his view that all theory, all ideology, all determinate meaning, all social commitment have become terroristic and writing is the answer to all such "terrorism." He thinks about writing that enables meaning to be dislocated, released from the straightjacket of a single identity. To understand why Barthes held this view, the context of modern France must be examined. Particularly important is the fact that he wrote *The Pleasure of the Text* five years after the 1968 students riots in Paris where France itself nearly collapsed into anarchy (Reader, 1987). Barthes (1982, p. 4) has written about Japan, as follows:

Today there are doubtless a thousand things to learn about the Orient: an enormous labor of knowledge is and will be necessary (its delay can only be the result of an ideological occultation); but it is also necessary that, leaving aside vast regions of darkness (capitalist Japan, America acculturation, technological development), a slender thread of light searches out not other symbols but the very fissure of the symbolic.

Barthes visited Japan as a member of a French cultural mission in 1966. *Empire of Signs* is a sort of impressionistic criticism of Japan which was written by Barthes in 1970. What Barthes hoped to reveal are things which have been concealed by metaphysics -- "another wisdom (the latter might appear thoroughly desirable)" -- but he keeps his perspective as an outsider and tries to forget his own background as a French person. Barthes somehow had a need to escape from metaphysics and logo-centrism in the West, but the Japanese do not need to escape. Japanese behave according to a cultural manner that Barthes likes, but it is always done involuntarily

unlike him. Only when a certain external perspective is brought into an internal culture, the culture can be accepted as an exotic presence. However, since this exteriority is always produced somewhere out there, we can hardly expect a neutral standpoint at all.

Barthes believes that, Japan as an empire of signs, is opposed to the West as an empire of meanings. This opposition between sign and meaning is equivalent to the opposition between full and empty. According to Barthes, people in the West always have a desire to fill signs with meanings; that is to say, the Western world is fulfilled by the metaphysics of Christianity. However, Japanese people reject filling signs with meaning involuntarily. Signs in Japan always exist with a kind of lack of meaning as if they are empty signs. It means that many signs are not explained by both spoken and written words in Japan. People do not have any desire to fill signs with meanings. In this quote he clarifies the most important difference between the West and Japan, namely, there is no antinomy in the Japanese *Bunraku* (the Japanese puppet performance that was originally begun in the sixth century) in contrast to the fact that a basic antinomy plays a very important role in Western drama. In the West, this antinomy is called dualism. Especially the modern Western thinkers, for example Descartes (1988), tried to understand the world as divided into the spirit and the body, mind and matter. Though we can find many common points between the Western and Japanese puppet performance in that they have a puppet, story, music, actor, audience and so on, the concept is completely different, that is to say, *Bunraku* is not based on Western dualism. Barthes contrasts the Western theater and the Japanese *Bunraku*, however, the Japanese have never regarded the *Bunraku* like Barthes does, that is to say, they have never tried to analyze the *Bunraku*.

"*Écriture*" (writing) is one of Barthes' best-known terms. It has an original meaning of "written language," "a literary expression," or "literary style." But he thinks *écriture* is a tendency which is seen in a certain period of literature and is independent of each single work. In *Empire of Signs*, *écriture* becomes a general term for a visual and spatial sign system. He (1982, p. 4) says:

Writing (*écriture*) is after all, in its way, a *satori*: *satori* (the Zen occurrence) is a more or less powerful (though in no way formal) seism which causes knowledge, or the subject, to vacillate: it creates an emptiness of language. And it is also an emptiness of language which constitutes writing; it is from this emptiness that derive the features with Zen, in the exemption from all meaning, writes gardens, gestures, houses, flower arrangements, faces, violence.

For Barthes, writing is "not in order to read it (to read its symbolism) but to follow the trajectory of the hand which has written it: a true writing," (Barthes, 1982, p. 45). He has also written about the Japanese *Kabuki* (one of the great three theatrical arts in Japan, which originally begun in Kyoto at the end of sixteenth century) actor, "The Oriental transvestite does not copy Woman but signifies her" (1982, p. 53). He thinks *écriture* is formed by a gesture of ideology, and that is why the Oriental transvestite is a gesture of the ideology of woman and is not plagiarism. "The whole of Zen wages war against the prevarication of meaning. We know that Buddhism baffles the fatal course of any assertion (or of any negation) by recommending that one never be caught up in the four following propositions: this is A--this is not A--this is both A and not A--this is neither A nor not-A...The Buddhist way is precisely that of the obstructed meaning: the very arcanum of signification, that is, the paradigm, is rendered impossible" (Barthes, 1982, p. 73).

This "exemption from meaning" is exactly what the Japanese culture values based on "ruminating" and "*satori*." Barthes explains "*satori*," as follows: "Westerners can translate only by certain vaguely Christian words (illumination, revelation, intuition), is no more than a panic suspension of language, the blank which erases in us the reign of the Codes, the breach of that internal recitation which constitutes our person" (Barthes, 1982, p.75). There is a particular space for *Bunraku* and *Kabuki* and those Western concepts such as metaphor, implication and dualism are not involved at all. Karatani (1989, pp.268-269) has written, as follows:

For example, the "Japan" of the Empire of Signs is a place of absence. Barthes's project was to reexamine Western thought in terms of an exteriority free of the sovereignty of the thinking subject which would be called "Japan." It is in this sense that Barthes's "spirit" exists: as a critique of the Western nineteenth century, seen as an aurarchy devoid of exteriority. But the "Japan" discovered by Barthes--that is, the Japanese nineteenth century--is also a despotic system.

What Karatani implies here is that two different cultures can co-exist, however, creating a sort of cultural mixture is not quite possible. Some commonalties can be found between two different cultures, however, many differences simultaneously exist. Karatani (1989, pp.271-272) concludes:

No matter what form the West's evaluation of Japan may take, Japan will remain for the West a place of exteriority rather than being what in fact it is: a discursive space filled with complacency and almost totally lacking in exteriority. Can there be a way out of this situation? The only word that comes to mind is "spirit," not, to be sure, interior or community spirit, but rather spirit as exteriority.

Karatani does not think that semiotics by Barthes can be considered as a tool to make a connection between two cultures (e.g., Japan and France). As Karatani says, the methodology to observe each cultural sophistication has to be spirit, since exteriority goes beyond simple stylistic borrowings or adaptation from Western concepts as the West sees it. The predictable question arises here: Can semiotic research make a link between the West and Japan in terms of social constructs of a space and location through time?

III. Sounds and Connotation

Barthes (1953) proposed the concept of denotation and connotations (first and second degree languages). The denotation refers to the actual things to which language applies. The connotation, however, brings in many more things and is the meaning proper of an expression. An American motion picture "*Finding Forrester*," directed by Gus Van Sart in 2000 interestingly illustrates the concept of connotation: Jamal Wallace (Robert Brown) is a 16 year old high school kid who lives in the Bronx, New York. He has an aptness at basketball and a genius at writing. He coincidentally meets Pulitzer-prize winning author and recluse William Forrester (Sean Connery). Jamal is helped along and shaped by Forrester. Some lines from the movie:

Forrester: Whatever happens, I am off. What's the word you and your friends would use for that?

Jamal: Leaving?

Forrester: Oh God...

Jamal: Where are you off to?

Forrester: Well, I have an old mind I haven't seen too long.

Jamal: You mean, Ireland?

Forrester: Scotland, for god sake!

"I am off" and "I am leaving" are denotatively the same meaning. However, Forrester does not like the term "leaving" at all. Ireland and Scotland denotatively express the two different countries but have totally different connotations. Barthes thinks that the concept of denotation/ connotation is a mythical system, which can apply to not only language but also any other social events. Barthes' concept should be applicable to acoustic environment as well as soundscape. We do not listen to sound itself as an acoustic entity. The sound merely creates metaphor and image, which we receive time to time. If anything we might not have any denotation after all.

Barry Truax (1984, pp. 47-48, p.147) writes:

Jacobson (1978) has described the linguistics relation of sound to meaning on the phonemic level in terms of

Saussure's concept of the sign through which the signifier and the signified are linked (Saussure, 1966)...Although originating in the theory of signs, these terms and model within which they function are useful for describing how sound communicates...In situations where sound is the conveyer of information, it functions in a quasilinguistic sense as a "signifier" of that information. One identifies a particular sound as indicating the environment.

Truax thinks that the concept of soundscape describes the various systems of acoustic communication in relationship to each other. Saussure (1966, p.67) referred to the arbitrary nature of the sign and the same concept of this arbitrariness applies in acoustic communication to some extent. Here is another example concerning denotation/ connotation in terms of acoustic communication. The sound of the bells at Nicoli Temple, a Russian Orthodox Church Temple, have been heard by people in the town of Kanda, in Tokyo. A variety of expressed values about Nicoli Temple were collected:

Question:

"Explain in words your impressions of the sound of the bells."

Answer:

"I wish you every happiness."

"It was a signal of evening in my childhood."

"I don't like it, because it reminds me of when I was poor."

"I wish to marry as soon as possible."

"It is not noisy. I have very fond memories of it."

(Imada, 1991, pp.214-215)

These informants listened to exactly the same bell sounds. However, each of them gave us totally different answers. The definition of the concept of soundscape by the World Soundscape Project (Truax, 1978, p.126) is:

An environment of sound (sonic environment) with emphasis on the way it is perceived and understood by the individual, or by society. It thus depends on the relationship between the individual and any such environment. The term may refer to actual environment, or to abstract constructions such as musical compositions and tape montages, particularly when considered as an artificial environment.

Even in the present time, the definition of "music" is still pretty much coming from nineteenth century Western aesthetics as articulated by Hanslick (1957) according to the musical situation of Western society in those days, in which critics had developed a position where music could exist as an autonomous world. Many music teachers, not only in Japan but also in North America, for example, assumes all music serves the same function for all human being, and that music is a kind of universal language for

all human races. The concept of soundscape, however, is the idea of perceiving various sounds such as the sound of nature, artificial sounds in cities and music, as total scenery. We could, therefore, see parallels between structuralist/ poststructuralist theories proposed by Barthes and Derrida and the concept of soundscape. There is an evidence concerning music/ noise contradiction. A Japanese theatrical company premiered their performance outside Japan in Chicago, the US in 1867 (Mihara, 1998). Their acrobatic performance was based on *kabuki* (one of the “great theatrical arts” with *noh* and *Bunraku*, which was originally begun in Kyoto at the end of sixteenth century). Aya Mihara (1998, pp.135-136) introduces some comments that reviewed about their Chicago tour, as follows:

Take, for instance, the peculiar tone which a dog emits when subjected to the irritation of a tin kettle tied to his tail, and under a rapid state of locomotion down a side street; join to this the heartbroken tone which a pig makes, under gate, when he cannot go forward, when it is forever too late to retrace his steps, and when it is misery to remain where he is; unite with this, the plaintive notes of a guinea hen in a state of mental agitation, and you have the peculiar music which my Japanese friend produces. To be sure, the dog, pig, guinea hen and Hollander together make more of a tune than he, which is not surprising, as one Japanese cannot be expected to rival the joint efforts of all these animals. (the Chicago Tribune June 2, 1867)

Today, we can easily see that a lack of information and understanding for Japanese culture and music and racial prejudice against Asian people that time. And we know that today’s music journalists in Chicago are quite unlike their cohorts one hundred years ago. If this is because they have more information about Japan, education regarding racism, where can we actually find the purely universal standpoint of music or sound, which all human beings can equally and denotatively share? Robert Walker (1990, pp. 187-188) writes:

It is commonly reported in many ethnological studies of the Australian aboriginal culture, for example, that the Australian aboriginal considers the role of the Dreamtime absolutely crucial to their survival. The Dreamtime is regarded as the truly creative time of their existence. It is the time when they make contact with the supernatural forces that shaped their universe. It is also regarded as the source and repository of songs and, indeed, all artistic activities...In such a belief system, creativity, as Western thought has defined it, cannot exist. There is no place for the individual as “creator” of his or her own music. This represents a significant and

qualitative difference between an aboriginal musician and a Western composer such as Liszt.

We have to make sure that the “affective power” of music, for example, belongs to Western culture. There are no terms for Western affective power in the Australian Aboriginal aural culture. As Walker mentions, there is no place for the individual as “creator” of his or her own music outside Western musical culture. The following hypothesis presumably comes into being:

- 1) We cannot universally understand acoustic ecology because acoustic ecology is arbitrarily created based on a specific epoch and culture. In other words, to understand the concept of acoustic ecology (method) or soundscape (practice) one must understand the cultural forms that produced it.
- 2) We can conceivably learn the concept of acoustic ecology or soundscape in terms of contextual relationships.

IV. Final Thoughts

Japanese music education has believed the European aesthetic values since the end of nineteenth century to the present time, that is to say, the imposition of European musical epistemology on Japan has continued over one hundred years. The concept of soundscape presumably tries to eradicate Western music’s autonomy, that is to say, people own personal standards can possibly re-examine all the traditions which Western music has preserved.

Derrida sees a fundamental alienation between speech events (*parole*) and writing (*écriture*). If one says the sea is blue, this *parole* may be expressing a specifically impressive blue, felt by a particular person. Writing (*écriture*), however, produces “the death of a subject,” because this writing does not represent (=presence) any specific feeling of any particular person at all and merely becomes a general linguistic sign. If one can possibly own the terms “the sea is blue” to express a specific feeling, nobody can use the terms any more. If language is the system of differences as Saussure says, language cannot be presence for anybody any more. Hence, language no longer represents any specific feeling of any particular person at all. The term “play” is therefore introduced by Derrida to indicate this absence of any transcendental meanings in *écriture* or text. Derrida thinks that as soon as one uses some words, language automatically gets involved in the system of differences and is separated from any original meanings. The combination between “original meaning,” “speech events (*parole*)” and “writing (*écriture*),” which phono-centrism takes for granted, and the presence of the truth ensured by

phono-centrism, cannot be established any longer. Thus, several possible arguments against Derrida exist. There are no absolute grounds for use of words such as truth, certainty, reality and so on. However, are we able to say that these words lack meaning? At the same time, if there are no certainties or truth, how do we know that there is no truth simply because words cannot tell us the truth? We should carefully take a look at what Derrida actually suggests. What are those terms such as deconstruction, *différance* (difference), and play, proposed by Derrida, actually for? The European people have always grasped reality by words. However, no matter how we try to explain this world by words, this world keeps continuously bringing new realities. Don't we call this sort of unpredictable nature, which the world has, "reality."? Derrida therefore states that European metaphysics cannot tell us any truth because of the huge gap between reality and human recognition, and this "world" is only "play" after all.

Many Western thoughts have already been introduced into Japan. This metamorphic process induces a black hole, which could presumably be explained by the term "play," to use Derrida's word, that is to say, bringing Western ideas or products into Japan without having European metaphysical ties. In stark words, many Japanese people have started to feel very strongly about their Japanese roots and how they made us think differently even though we were brought up with Western artifacts in Japan. There can be no such thing as a neutral standpoint to a Japanese. Perhaps our postmodern world has sown post-colonial contacts after all. Post-colonial theory (e.g., Loomba, 2001) has revealed how notions of the universal are ethnocentric since their formulations are created by the image (connotation) of the dominant culture (i.e., Euro-American culture). The imposition of European epistemology on non-Western nations has continued for over one hundred years. Soundscape is useful as a concept, for example, in Japanese education, in that it can illuminate us how to simply listen to sounds critically and socio-culturally. Simultaneously we should re-examine this idea by post-colonial theory in order to go beyond a simple adaptation of Suzerains' concept, as the West views sound and culture.

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