

The Commons as a Scene of Ordinary Irritation

Emma Bennett, 1st May 2020

I am thinking about listening, listening in - and to - a time and place, and thinking too about significance. How do we attribute significance to a sound and its effect upon us, on things, becoming aware of our listening in a twist of attention, that it might rise out of the ordinary and become a signal of the times? Especially at this moment, in which whatever it is that counts as 'ordinary' has been subjected to peculiar transformations, an oddly epochal kind of pressure, a confoundedness held in that phrase, repeatedly typed, 'these are not normal times'?

Our earlier conversations about 'nature', and what sonic ecologists like Bernie Krauss have named as 'acoustic habitats', carry with them a set of confused and conflicting values [1]. We do not think nature exists 'out there', in a wilderness beyond the reach of most people apart from those brave wanderers, often male, often white, with strong legs and the right gear, and the privileged right to take off, take up space. Poet Kathleen Jamie has written of her frustration with the figure of the 'lone enraptured male', who writes of a place he names 'wild' in 'honeyed prose' [2]. But nature has all kinds of registers, she argues, some of them mysterious and epic, others muted and sad, others still cheeky and subversive: the dandelion poking up between paving slabs is 'wild', as is the raucous urban blackbird whose call has evolved to be shrill and loud in order to be heard above the din of the city. And yet, the din of the city is undeniably exhausting, and damaging too – damage that is unequally distributed. In the industrialised, and post industrialised city, silence, like darkness, has become a luxury commodity, available to the few and not the many.

In this quieter city (or should we say, this differently noised one) - how do we register the absence of some sounds (roads, railways, flight paths, deliveries, voices) - as relief, as eerie portent, as crisis? And what is our relation with the continuing or intensified soundings of others. I am thinking now of the intermittently malfunctioning alarms of the empty office buildings around here, in my new neighbourhood in central Dublin. Office buildings constructed and converted from dwellings during the boom years, now lie marooned, crying petulantly into the night. Then there's the repetitive cheeping of an unseen bird that we take, at certain moments, for an alarm, at others for a hungry chick. Occasionally, the echo of raised voices of people whose chanced encounter must be played out at a distance of 2 meters, the unfamiliar accents of which remind me, sometimes with a jolt, that I am here, in this new country.

The domestic, if you are lucky, (that is, if you can afford space, and curtains, and a quiet street, and windows that close snugly and keep the weather out) can seem to float free of its context. This is the legacy of the nineteenth century domestic interior that so preoccupied Walter Benjamin in his Arcades Project, which the latter likens to the inside of a mollusk shell. In his whirling assemblage of writings, pressing his thought close to surfaces and materials that sustained the illusions of 'private man', Benjamin was 'bringing to light an uncanny sense of crisis and of security, of crisis in security'. In the

domestic interior, 'things were coming to seem more entirely material than ever and, at the same time, more spectral and estranged' [3].

Here is what I wrote one day, near the beginning of the lockdown, thinking about what the Covid-19 world does to the view outside the window:

The airlessly threatening character 'the outside' has taken on, the enormity of this something beyond our windowpanes. The clean white light is doubt, those near-empty pavements suffused with it.

Working from home, in these conditions, has effected a change in my relationship with ambience, with the light and sound that leaks into my room from the outside. Ordinarily, I now realise, these atmospheric facts function as a perfunctory, reliable sense of 'meanwhile': elsewheres held together and apart within temporal systems, institutional times, professionalisms being gainfully exercised.

The world, going on, as it does. But in this room, today - a bright day in the month of March (although the date, the month, this standardisation of the light and its movement, seems oddly - almost hysterically - moot), I catch myself. I catch myself in a familiar, pleasurable guilty moment of the kind that suffuses my domestic life: registering, in fleeting partiality, a change in the light, in the direction and angle of the sunlight falling onto the pavement below my window. Associating that, on some subconscious level, with the progress of a day - the day outside, beyond.

When 'day' means day as regulated and approved by an institution of work, or education, or some other form of activity, existence, as verified. The working day, perhaps.

In other words, I caught myself for a moment forgetting that things are not as they ordinarily are. When I can rely on the work of others, constantly, continuing, somewhere else.

This is not business as usual.

What I mean is, I caught myself in a momentary pleasure-scene of having escaped, through domestic solitude, the working day. I was a dandy of the domestic scene, milking pleasure from the subtle changes of light upon my carpet. It was nice, a relief. A guilty one, of course.

And then I remembered, again.

I look up, now, as a test, toward the window, and encounter a sharpening of that feeling - that the outside world is pressing in, with its ominous light, its ambivalent mood, its potential, or demand, for contact.

This brings me to the question that Federici poses, in the passage quoted by Ella in her text: that of how we might 'recombine what the social division of labour in capitalism has separated', to feel and acknowledge the presence of the others, the elsewheres, that bear the social and environmental burden of 'our' (i.e. Western, economically enabled) consumption. For Federici, it is the distancing of production from reproduction and consumption under capitalism and globalisation that supports, perhaps necessitates, our capacity to ignore the fates of others - 'the population on whom the waste we produce is unloaded'. What is needed is, first, 'a profound transformation in our everyday life', and perhaps this would enable fresh attention to the infrastructures that materially facilitate a large part of what we, 'here', know and experience as 'ordinary'.

For a set of responses, practical strategies as much as resonant ideas, to this problem, I have turned, returned, to the writing of artist and disability activist Petra Kuppers. In a participatory project, WEFT, Kuppers sought to foster freshly attentive, somatic awareness of the fabrics and everyday materials that touch their bodies. Working against the ‘estranged relationship to everyday materials’ that characterises a lack of awareness of how, and where, clothing is made, Kuppers encourages her participants to address ‘their embodied relationship to their clothes, to the transnational practices that sustain their production, and to the scene of the factory – the people who first touched the fabrics that touch our skin now’ [4] (Kuppers, 402).

In one of several actions, Kuppers asked participants to become aware of the pull of fabric on their chest, waist, encircling their wrists and feet, to sense the resistance of the material they are breathing against. ‘This is an unusual instruction’, writes Kuppers, as ‘so much of our engagement with clothing is about minimizing sensation, and our sensorium is intent on shutting out the sensation of clothing, in order to be able to focus on other sense input’ (Kuppers, 405). As a facilitator, Kupper plants strategic irritants in the somatic scene of deep breathing, balancing comfort and relaxation with discomfort.

Irritation, then, understood as something scratchy and all-too-persistent at the level of emotional experience (that which you can’t not attend to), and on the skin’s surface. Both Kuppers and I are thinking here of the work of cultural theorists like Sianne Ngai and Ann Cvetkovic’s work on negative affect, those sensations customarily dismissed as superficial or unwanted that nevertheless persist, and which, suggests Kuppers are characteristic of the broader condition of living in neoliberal times [5]. Existing on the edge of sadness, with a sense of immobility and inability in the face of whatever we name or experience as those ‘big forces’ that weigh on us, and the present.

The synthetic labels sewn into the inside seams of mass-produced clothing very often go unnoticed, unless, that is, they cause irritation. However, noticing the labels in our own, and each other’s clothing might, as it does in Kuppers’ work, offer a fast way of ‘plac[ing] ourselves into different spatial registers of intimacy, near and far, global and local’ (410). Irritation then, as among the negative or weak affects that Cvetkovic suggests can be ‘depathologized’ through communal attunement, in order to become a possible resource for political action. A collectively recognised irritation, by ‘undoing the smoothness of woven textiles’, might ‘foreground the wider global interdependencies and woven connections that make up our social realm’ (Kuppers, 402).

It’s not a coincidence that it is a disability artist who brings me to this heightened awareness, or acknowledge of the sensory awarenesses that have been pathologized by a normative, neoliberal version of what is ‘ordinary’. Kuppers quotes Olimpias performer Mark Romoser, an Autistic Self-Advocate, who describes the way ‘many people on the spectrum cannot NOT feel their clothes’: counter to the common assumption that ‘autistic people are not enough in the world’, on the contrary, ‘some of the specific aesthetics and somatics of autism place people deeply into the world, engaged with its materiality in ways that might be channeled into a political action’ (Kuppers, 410).

It may seem I have strayed some way from the original question, which concerned

listening - listening in, and to, an 'ordinary' we are encountering as 'new', or 'strange', characterised by crisis and by loss, and yet one that we hope to transform into a moment of possibility, rather than that all too familiar sense of debility, of weakness (a sense of 'nothing can be done – by me').

What little I do understand of 'our current situation', I understand as a loss of physical proximity. We are apart, as Ella put it, 'uncommonly at home'. And home, for me, is a space of relieved quietude, guilty solitude, in which I like to take a dandified pleasure, at best. An illusion, or dream, rendered possible by the acoustic and textural effects of fabric. Absorption, muffling. Like Mrs Marroner, from the Charlotte Perkins Gilman story, who we meet as she lies weeping on her wide soft bed [6].

The relief of the domestic, with its soft acoustic, was, for some time, brought into ever sharper relief by my lengthy commute: I spent more than two years regularly spending more than two hours on a train. Ears stopped in futile efforts to insulate me from the irritations of crinkling, chewing, sniffing, typing, and business-like chatting, the agonies of social proximity with strangers in a 'designated quiet coach'.

I can recall, now, with something approaching nostalgia, the dimensionality of this ambience, this irritation of packages and snacks and mouth sounds. That is, now that I am habituated to the thin, flattened sound of the several elsewheres piped through Zoom or Skype or Virtual Classroom's tinny acoustics. Now that the novelty has faded, my contact with others carries an alienated, exhausted feeling. The delays and distortions of the interface demolish the subtlety of turn-taking: missed cues, interruptions. We talk over one another, and I amplify my laugh, awkwardly, to signal affability, a wish for contact. I am confused to find myself breathless, as I strain my voice talking into a tiny microphone. I watch myself, in the corner, as I do it.

I am working something out, or working towards something, about surface. The fabric of our common world, and the acoustics that go along with it. Working towards an understanding of the irritations of contact, those ordinary affects that pull us out of ourselves and into the less-than-perfect world. When we cannot touch one another, we are still in contact with the fabric of a built world, a world constructed through the effort of many hands. The cannot-help-but-hear might be a category of irritation, but it might also be the totally non-utopian, daily condition of a shared world. It might be somewhere I can start, in my small, close, and pedantic way, to understand what an acoustic commons might mean, in practice.

1. Bernie Krauss, *The Great Animal Orchestra*, 2012.
2. Kathleen Jamie, 'A Lone Enraptured Male', *London Review of Books*, 3 (5), 6 March, 2008.
3. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 1999, Translator's Introduction, p. xii.
4. Petra Kuppers, 'Occupy the WEFT: Choreographing Factory Affect and Community Performance', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 25:3, 2015, 401-416
5. Ann Cvetkovic, 'Public Feelings', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106.3 (2007), 459-68 ;

Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 2005.
6. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'Turned', 1911.