Noise and annoyance

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While noise is an integral part of most human activities, it was only at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s that our sonic environment began to interest researchers. This interest continued to grow with the noise levels in our societies. A researcher at the social and cultural anthropology laboratory of the University of Liège, Paul-Louis Colon published an article entitled "Listening to noise and making annoyance heard" (1). An ethnographical approach to noise.

We live in a time when noise is very often a source of much inconvenience or even annoyance and is certainly not "much ado about nothing" to use the words of Shakespeare. The annoyance caused takes different forms according to the public concerned. While noise has always been present in our society, urbanization and the development of transport by car and by air have contributed to a marked increase in the noise levels our ears have been subjected to for more than thirty years. "This increase in noise levels led to an awareness of our sonic environment in the 1970s, it was at this time that politicians began to take an interest in the question of noise and began to think about regulation. In Belgium, the first federal law on noise dates from 1973. It was also at this time that research programs on noise were developed as part of the physical sciences on the one hand and on the other, artistic studies by visual artists and musicians such as the American Max Neuhaus who explored noise and the sonic environment", explains Paul-Louis Colon, a researcher at the Laboratory of social and cultural anthropology of the University of Liège. This contemplative approach to the sonic environment which was very much in vogue around thirty years ago was succeeded by numerous studies and scientific research both from an acoustic and from a social point of view. The approach adopted by Paul-Louis Colon "is located at the crossroads between two strands of research that it is trying to express". The first is the question of annoyance linked to noise; the second concerns what can be referred to as "ordinary auditory experience, that is to say the knowledge and know-how attached to listening in everyday life".
Symbolic and contextual dimension to noise

Having established that the correlation between the noise level and the declared annoyance is relatively slight, research has been carried out in order to discover other parameters which come into play such as the symbolic and contextual dimension. "Context plays an important role. Beyond the acoustic dimension, other factors influence annoyance such as judgments of normality applied to sound, the interpersonal relational context (in the case of neighborhood noise), the way of managing the problem and the attitude of institutions to local residents (as in the case of noise around airports)\(^{1}\), attachment to territory and investment in local life (also in relation to the noise of aircraft)\(^{1}\). Added to this approach which is linked to annoyance is the listening approach which also deals with the problems linked to noise but aims especially to explore the positive aspects of the sonic environment.

However, it soon became apparent to researchers, notably those of the Centre for Research on Sonic Space and Urban Environment (CRESSON) in Grenoble, that it was the negative aspects that were predominant in the discussions between the different actors. "The researchers in CRESSON have therefore developed specific methodological tools aimed at creating a debate around this object which is rarely put into words and which have made possible the construction of theoretical ideas to take account of ordinary listening. In this way they have demonstrated the contribution of sounds to the identity of places, and in return, the relevance of the social and cultural context in the sonic reading of spaces". Paul-Louis Colon has combined access by ordinary experience with access by annoyance in order to deal with noise and the annoyance it can cause. He has therefore studied the way these factors combine and cause a feeling of annoyance and how the affected individual can remedy this annoyance. In the context of his study, he has conducted 25 in-depth interviews generally carried out in people's homes, that is to say in the place where nuisance is generally caused. These interviews have been contextualized by observing meetings, citizens' actions, informal discussions and documents produced by the different participants. While studies of annoyance are generally aimed at a precise category of sonic sources, the analysis has compared different situations involving a wide variation of noise annoyance (air traffic, road traffic, neighborhood, recreational activities, industries, etc.).

Emergence of annoyance

"Noise encompasses different meanings. There is the sound that disturbs the sound that is objectively strong, the sound that something produces, etc. Anything can be noise. For a given acoustic level, not everyone necessarily experiences annoyance. It is a very subjective subject but this is not why it is personal. It is subjective in the sense that it mobilizes the individual; it is not personal because different people in different situations experience noise in accordance with similar processes. And yet, this subjective dimension is rarely taken into account. In many cases, we have a normative approach. Below certain norms there is not considered to be any noise annoyance. This is the core of the problem because, nonetheless, the fact remains that even if annoyance no longer legally exists, it is still present," continues Paul-Louis Colon. We are constantly evolving in a sonic environment and annoyance appears when there is a change in the attention brought to bear on this environment. Yet it is still true that not all sounds that are produced necessarily cause annoyance. Some are temporary; others are only felt a "long time after they have
This identification then has a “revelation” effect as illustrated by the case of an individual living alone in a rural house and who is badly affected by noise from aircraft. The individual concerned therefore states that the noise only began to annoy them from the moment they became aware that it was a problem even though the noise already existed beforehand. The change came about when a friend pointed out to them that a plane passed over their balcony every three minutes. In another case, a woman only became aware of the noise of planes over her house when visiting a new house. Once they have become aware of the annoyance, people want to identify what is annoying them and this often varies from one person to another.
A common element of annoyance is its repetitive nature even though some people are sensitive to the noise of a passing tractor, a lawn-mower or a chainsaw. "People have learned to identify particular properties in sounds which fuel their annoyance by making connections between different types of sounds and different occurrences. It is precisely the spread of phenomena in time, their repetition, which makes it possible to highlight the difference between them. But the perceptive properties of sound do not define it completely, the context of perception is also important on several levels. Individuals are more sensitive to noise at night, for example. There is also the wider context that a noise is placed in and where its amplitude can vary from an interpersonal level to creating societal challenges. For example, several people encountered during the study directly associate the noise from aircraft and tensions between communities in Belgium (in the case of Brussels- National Airport)", explains Paul Louis Colon.

A persistent and painful noise

By identifying this noise and feeling disturbed by it, the person then experiences real suffering. As highlighted by a woman who was questioned by the author: "It is pain but it is not acute pain, it is silent and continuous. It is not even pain, it is a kind of annoyance, something that irks you and that you have to live with like a kind of arthrosis, rheumatism or something of the sort which you can't get rid of ". This is even more true because as Paul-Louis Colon points out, "when confronted by noise, people find themselves in the position of being more and more affected by it without being able to act". Confronted by noise disturbance, some people use defense techniques such as listening to music, generally louder than the noise thus creating a kind of "mask effect" which attenuates the source of the noise or strategies of avoidance consisting in organizing their activities and their occupation of domestic spaces according to the different ways the noises appear. In addition to the negative consequences that these annoyances produce on the emotional state and health of the people who experience them, we also notice that they suffer from what the author calls "the difficulty of being heard". Firstly, because they have difficulty expressing in words the annoyance that they are feeling; secondly,
because they notice that their problem is often treated from the perspective of acoustic levels. Although the levels that are measured are those which respond to the norms being applied, the problem is minimized or even denied. "These levels do not take account of many situations of annoyance". The interest of an ethnographic approach, in contrast with meticulous surveys by means of questionnaires, for example, is that it makes it possible to go beyond the identification of factors which influence annoyance, showing how these combine in the noise situation, and how this situation can develop in the long term. From this perspective, the determinism of the different factors no longer appears unequivocal. Their respective influences can vary over time and their significance can be reinterpreted. The individual being disturbed is not passive in relation to their disturbance: they try to understand it, to keep it at a distance, get around it and in this way regain a certain mastery of their environment.

(1) "Listen to noise and make annoyance heard", in Communications. Noises in the town (dir. A. Pecqueux), n°90, pp. 95 - 107, 2012.