

Louder

Jason Alley

Abstract

A series of musings on listening to the city amidst pandemic motivated retreats and diminished soundscapes. It latches onto some possible lines of flight — courtesy of the author’s own experiences and others’ art.

1

Our cities do sound audibly quieter amidst the pandemic-motivated retreat from public spheres. Yet quiet used to be the provenance of nighttime sojourns through the city. A place like New York City could sound quieter in certain quadrants after midnight. Think of Edward Hopper's iconic painting *Nighthawks* (1942) or the photographic work of Corey Hayes. (In the tradition of the photographer as ethnographic accompaniment, see Hayes's wonderful work in Russell Leigh Sharman and Cheryl Harris Sharman's *Nightshift NYC*.) Or consider my image, taken on a Sunday evening in 2019 in Madison, capturing the city's emptiness and silence, en route for a glass of wine (or two). There is a synergy at play here between the stillness of the photographic image and the stillness of the night. The city's acoustic environs have always made space for quietness. Never silence—but an ebbing of noise as night became day (Fig. 1).

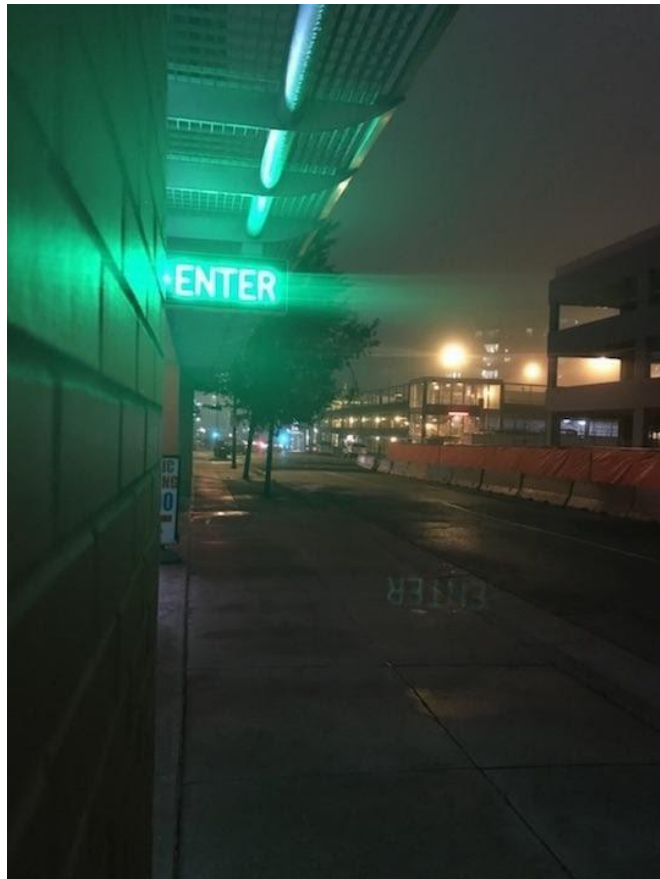


Fig. 1. Sunday evening in Madison. 2019. Photographer: Jason Alley.

2

In 1978, John Cage created a rhizomatic map entitled *A Dip in the Lake: Ten Quicksteps, Sixty-two Waltzes, and Fifty-six Marches for Chicago and Vicinity*. A series of lines crisscrosses the city corresponding to the particular forms enumerated in the work's title. These certainly would have been considered older genres of dance and music by the time Cage produced this work. For the Fourth of July parade in Peoria or the Arthur Murray jet set. According to one source, "After producing the map, Cage published a separate document that outlined all of the 'steps' by listing each street intersection where the lines on the map met...Cage did not leave very specific instructions about what to do with this information. Instead, in a type-written message at the beginning of the nine-page list, Cage simply explains that this is: 'For performer(s) or listener(s) or record maker(s)'" ([Watkins](#)). Looking at the map, I try to imagine the choreographed movements and dissonant soundscapes that Chicago might have unleashed had the city ever tried to perform the piece (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: *A Dip in the Lake: Ten Quicksteps, Sixty-two Waltzes, and Fifty-six Marches for Chicago and Vicinity*, by John Cage, 1978. Photo credit: Jason Alley.

3

I miss the city's sonic bustle. It has not entirely disappeared. But it is diminished. The urban noisemaking machine—producing clangs, bangs, sirens, monologues, shouts, footsteps, horns, laughter—has become pleasant background Muzak. In San Francisco, during a raucous Pride or Friday night, I used to periodically look up at the apartments above the EndUp or Pilzner from the outdoor patio view of things. Had their occupants already vacated, like clockwork, hours before? Was our queer cacophony the stuff of white noise machines lulling them softly to sleep? Were *they* actually *us*, waiting to retire upstairs once the scene got dull or 2:00AM rolled around?

4

I went looking for that noisemaking machine in two places recently. Henry Hills's *Money* (1985) jolted me the first time I saw it at a former church turned artists' space. It still does the trick. Splicing together orated monologues and direct address exchanges with sonic and bodily performances by the likes of John Zorn, Abigail Child, Yoshiko Chuma, Christian Marclay and others, Hills's fourteen plus minutes of audiovisual overload is a master class in the art of film editing. The cuts are percussive, aided by the sonic discontinuities as one frame interrupts the next on down the line. Those sonic bleeds heighten the film's frenetic pacing while rendering the city itself as one Mobius strip of cacophony. New York City never sounded livelier and more chaotic.

The second place I went looking for it was courtesy of Huang Weikai's *Disorder* (2009). Culled from the footage of a dozen amateur videographers out shooting in Guangzhou, China's third largest city, it upends the tradition of the city symphony—that cycle of films released in the early decades of the 20th century celebrating the marvels of the modern metropolis. Here the tactics resonate with Hills's project. Sounds carry over from one sequence to the next as our editor meets auteur circles back to narrative lines and minor dramas. To call the video an anti-symphony is not an exaggeration. Less manically cut than *Money*, Huang manages nonetheless to jostle his viewers into seeing and hearing things unfurl with uncanny verisimilitude. I cannot help but think of Georg Simmel's 1903 characterization of urban life as comprised of "...the rapid telescoping of changing images..." and the "...unexpectedness of violent stimuli" (Simmel 11).

5

I take a catnap one evening that lasts longer than it should. Holing up in a tiny hotel room, I put myself quickly together and head to the lobby in minutes just as a crew of flight attendants rolls in. These are the days I crave the city. Its sights and sounds. Cramming a night's worth of frolicking into a couple of hours, the DJ ends his set with the extended mix of New Order's "Blue Monday" (1983). I am all hyped up and wander back out onto the streets as if returning from a sexcapade.

6

This is not all about *jouissance*. There are plenty of city sounds I could do without. My current neighbors' guffawing and inane yammering while high would be on that list. Celebratory bullets on New Year's Eve. Other people's sex. And more.

7

What if we could calibrate the city's volume at will (with options for treble and bass)? I would love the option of periodically turning up the sound of an electric trolley bus taking off or turning around a corner. Or of slightly turning down the world destroying crunching of recyclables that I awaken to more times than not these days. What sounds would be worth pausing so as to return to later? Sound artists and radio producers obviously know a thing or two about these matters. But my queries are more about our sensorial attention span than documentary praxis. Listening to the city now from the vantage point of diluted encounters, I do want to hold onto as much of it—the concertos and noise—as possible.

Works Cited

- Hills, Henry, dir. *Money*. 1985. Film transferred to video file, 14:22. Vimeo.
Uploaded by Henry Hills, March 21, 2017. <https://vimeo.com/209395933>.
- Huang, Weikai, dir. *Disorder*. 2009. New York: Icarus Films Home Video, 2012.
DVD.
- Sharman, Russell Leigh and Cheryl Harris Sharman. *Nightshift NYC*. Berkeley,
University of California Press, 2008.
- Simmel, Georg. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." *The Blackwell City Reader*,
edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing,
2002, pp. 11-19.
- Watkins, Lauren C. "A Dip in the Lake: Ten Quicksteps, Sixty-two Waltzes, and
Fifty-six Marches for Chicago and Vicinity." *Terra Foundation for American
Art*. <https://www.terraamericanart.org/learning/a-dip-in-the-lake-ten-quicksteps-sixty-two-waltzes-and-fifty-six-marches-for-chicago-and-vicinity/>. Accessed 17 October 2020.

About the author

Jason Alley is Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Beloit College who brings ongoing interests in ethnographic praxis, urban environs and visual culture to the table. His work has appeared in *GLQ*, *Media Fields Journal*, *Somatosphere* and elsewhere. Email: alleyj@beloit.edu.