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sonicsthesia

Sonic
adjective
denoting, relating to, or
of the nature of sound

synesthesia
noun
a perceptual
phenomenon where
stimulation of one
sensory pathway leads
to involuntary
experiences in another

Preface

In September 2023, I started the playlist 'Wooden Girl' on Spotify with the intention of ascribing a soundtrack to what I had identified as 'cityscape gloom'. In Mark Fisher's *Ghosts of my Life*, he describes the London syphoned through Burial's music as

'a wounded city, populated by ecstasy casualties on day release from psychiatric units, disappointed lovers on night buses, parents who can't quite bring themselves to sell their Rave 12 inches at a carboot sale, all of them with haunted looks on their faces, but also haunting their interpassively nihilist kids with the thought that things weren't always like this.' (Fisher, 2014. 99).

These carefully curated semantics of a muted, libidinally bankrupt London speak to the visceral way in which an artist's soundscape can insert their listener into a specific lifeworld/ reification of the city. The main objective of my playlist was to translate the semiotics of the city in a way that, upon listening, would elicit the affective reaction I associated with slick, grey asphalt and compact tenement flats, of how I felt myself to exist within the city's layers. What I didn't know was that a few months later it would take the form of an essay on what I would term 'sonic perturbation'.

The essay took a selection of songs by the London based band Bar Italia and held them up against Lauren Berlant's concept of 'embodied perturbation' (2011), matching the band's anxious vocal interactivity and desynchronisation to the nervous system symptoms that Berlant asserts as a 'politico-affective condition'. This zine is a visual and conceptual elaboration of the essay. In the following pages, I will construct my own list of symptoms related to sonic perturbation, as a mode through which to identify songs that fall within its categorisation. Berlant's list is organised alphabetically:

(a) vulnerability: the steadily experience of flexibility without any form of protection [sic]; (b) hyperactivity: the imperative to accommodate constant availability; (c) simultaneity: the ability to handle at the same [time] the different tempi and velocities of multiple activities; (d) recombination: the crossings between various networks, social spaces, and available resources; (e) post-sexuality: the other as dildo; (f) fluid intimacies: the bodily production of indeterminate gender relations; (g) restlessness: being exposed to and trying to cope with the overabundance of communication, cooperation and interactivity; (h) unsettledness: the continuous experience of mobility across different space and time lines; (i) affective exhaustion: emotional exploitation, or, emotion as an important element for the control of employability and multiple dependencies; (j) cunning: able to be deceitful, persistent, opportunistic, a trickster. (197).

However, I will organise my list according to an asemic alphabet of my own making, each symbol representative of an abstraction of urban architectures.

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It is recommended that the reader listens to the chosen songs when they are mentioned.

wooden girl

Changer - Bar Italia
100 - Dean Blunt
Rinsed - Dean Blunt, TYSON
Scratchcard Lanyard - Dry Cleaning
Kwenchy Cups - Dry Cleaning
Punkt - Bar Italia
Cocaine Man - Baxter Dury
Human, for a minute - Shame Banks - Bar Italia
I Don't Want To Lose this - Ringo Deathstarr
Slow - My Bloody Valentine
Swampy - Dry Cleaning
Nurse! - Bar Italia
Marbles - Tindersticks
Porcelain - Jonatan leandoer69

the rot - Dean Blunt
When you sleep - My Bloody Valentine
New Birds - Arab Strap
Be Still/We Will Live Like Thunder - Calm
Skylinny - Bar Italia
my little tony - Bar Italia
F.O.B. - Bar Italia
Clark - Bar Italia
rage quit - Bar Italia
calm down with me - Bar Italia
Mariana Trenchcock - Bar Italia
Polly Armour - Bar Italia
Days Incomplete - Fine
Star - Good Sad Happy Bad
I Dream Of Jeannie - With the Light Brown Hair - Stina Nordenstam



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(a) arrhythmia

Symptom (a) of sonic perturbation; arrhythmia

Bar Italia's song 'Calm Down With Me' can be felt to take place within a city layered in appearances, out of sync with itself. Whether it's Sam Fenton, Jezmi Fehmi or Nina Crisante singing (or all of them) their voices are incessantly desynchronised, both sonically and lyrically. As Henri Lefebvre writes in his book "Rhythmanalysis" (1992),

'Rhythm is founded on the experience and knowledge [connais- sance] of the body (...) Alliance supposes harmony between different rhythms; conflict supposes arrhythmia: a divergence in time, in space, in the use of energies.' (67).

The interlacing, discordant voices of Bar Italia are anything but harmonious. The arrhythmia they suppose can be understood as sonically transmitting an affective state of being. For this reason, Lefebvre's assertion that we are all subject to the polyrhythmic of a social body is integral to contextualising Bar Italia as a band born and in part moulded by the city. The polyrhythmic that Bar Italia taps into is, ironically, the very arrhythmia that an overpopulated, over-monetized city such as London inculcates its populace with – at the crux of which lies a paradox that anyone who has lived in a capital city at any given point has felt at least once: the relatability inherent to not being able to relate to anyone.





(b) bitten tongues

Symptom (b) of sonic perturbation; bitten tongues

Bitten tongues - the other as inaccessible, things left unsaid, unfelt. Bar Italia's song 'Changer' emulsifies this feeling with the contained city space through the mournfully sung lyric; "Didn't get the chance to say | I want more | doesn't have to be this way | It's too pure | now that you have gone away | I'm bored | I'm going out every day | to make sure" (Bar Italia). This is a sonically synesthetic field of missed connections, lifeworld's out of sync with each other, where intuitive connection is just beyond reach and the only way to mitigate its absence is by flitting between bars, pubs, clubs. Yearning in Bar Italia's city does not arise from romantic devastation, but from boredom. It is not a city in which the disconnected seek solace in each other's company, but a city where disconnection is inadvertently chosen. It is an overcrowded flat party where the two people who most want each other spend the night in conversation elsewhere, looking over shoulders at each other with glazed eyes and glancing away before their gaze can be met.





(c) despondency

Symptom (c) of sonic perturbation; despondency

Despondency can be felt in the tone of the voice, the lilt of the instruments. It's akin to apathy, but differs in its concern with melancholia, with grief. 'New Birds' by Arab Strap is sung with a visceral despondency steeped in Aidan Moffat's monotone narration and the noise of the guitar. He sings of the chance encounters of the city – he sees an old love in a pub, sitting with 'her new life and her new hair'. They talk about their new loves, their new houses. She invites him back, he suggests they take separate taxis. He chooses to go back to his new love, wordlessly. 'There might be a slight regret and maybe you'll wonder what you missed,' he says flatly. The listener might think they have heard a twinge of wist, or of loss, but it can only be lyrical; the timbre of Moffat's voice remains devoid of emotion, its cadence the same throughout, the kind you might hear from a ticket inspector on his tenth row of passengers. The city of 'New Birds' is one that coalesces and breaks connections, through the intersections of pubs, streets, taxis and flats.





(d) indeterminate consciousness

Symptom (d) of sonic perturbation; indeterminate consciousness

Following an interview conducted with Tricky, Mark Fisher writes on the interaction of voices in the album 'maxinquaye':

It is an art of splitting which is also an art of doubling. Through the women who sing for/as him, Tricky becomes less than one, a split subject that can never be restored to wholeness. Yet their voicing of his incompleteness also makes him more than one, a double in search of a lost other half it will never recover. (2014: 44)

In Bar Italia's 'Polly Armour', the simultaneous merging and iterating of their voices in and out of each other makes it unclear to the listener whether they are hearing a conversation between Nina, Jezmi and/or Sam, or a singular splintered consciousness expressing itself through more than one vessel and gender. This results in an anxious vocal interactivity that feels more restless and fractured than it does fluid. Their disembodied voices can be pictured wandering aimlessly through brown-brick cement new-builds and oily asphalt pavements after dark, unable to shake a sense of unplaceable wrongness near-curdled into apathy from a city that has become deadened by its excess of grey noise (the sound of which is emulated in the majority of their songs).





(e) kitchen sink (sonic) realism

Symptom (e) of sonic perturbation; kitchen sink (sonic) realism

'Kitchen Sink Realism' was a British cultural movement of the 1960's that focused on the domestic, quotidian struggles of working-class life, depicting social realism through the dilapidated setting of a cramped apartment or grimy pub. In the song 'Swampy' by Dry Cleaning, Florence Shaw tells impassively of transformations such as 'the pub where all those things happened' changed to a burger place called 'Moo'; a 'concrete front garden' where 'plants grow around the edges'. The image transmitted is one of a city littered with regeneration schemes, of brutalist architectures as living spaces. The song's end – 'bear witness | pass no comment | simply be there to see it' – feels like the underlying demand of Laura Grace Ford's zine 'Savage Messiah'; a psychogeographic documentation of her drifts through a ruined London, recalling narcotic memories trailing her forgotten metropolis.

In an interview, Ford explained "I was drifting through a London haunted by traces and remnants of rave, anarcho-punk scenes and hybrid subcultures at a time when all these incongruous urban regeneration schemes were happening. The idea that I was moving through a spectral city was really strong, it was as if everything prosaic and dull about the New Labour version of the city was being resisted by these ghosts of brutalist architecture, of '90s convoy culture, rave scenes, '80s political movements and a virulent black economy of scavengers, peddlers and shoplifters"

It is this same spectrality conveyed sonically in 'Swampy', as a map of memories that are being overwritten and architectures that are being overgrown, reminisced over deadpan musings and an eerily discordant backing track.





(f) extradiegetic – the far-removed voice

Symptom (f) of sonic perturbation; extradiegetic – the far-removed voice

Adjective
extradiegetic

1. External to the narrative.

Listening to music is an inherently extradiegetic act. Considering the 'narrative' comprises the soundscape of your surroundings, to listen to music is to superimpose your own, far-removed soundscape over that which is attached to the reality at hand. However, the song in itself is also a diegesis – a short audio narrative. Within the diegesis of the song, there is the diegesis of the instrumentals, of the voice. Prior to their final production, each of these elements have their own respective narrative value, some of which may remain separate depending on the songs mixing. In 'Rinsed' by Dean Blunt and TYSON, the voice mirrors the superimposition of the song on the listeners diegesis: they resound above the music, directly into your ear, while the guitar remains ten feet away.

This is reversed in a song like 'Sometimes' by My Bloody Valentine. Here, the voice is behind the instruments, only just surfacing their white noise. In both instances, the result is something like holding a conversation passing over a motorway, or next to the speaker at a party; however while in the former you have succeeded in zoning into what you are being told, in the latter you are struggling to focus on any words. The tension between associative and dissociative listening forms a big part of my relationship with the city. I never wear headphones when I can hear the birdsong.



Works cited:

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press)

Fisher, Mark. 2014. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology + Lost Futures*. (London: Zero Books)

Lefebvre, Henri [1992]. 2004. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. Trans. by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum Books).

