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NABOKOV'S SONIC GEOGRAPHIES

Sound and geography

Although geography addresses all the senses¹ its discourse has been dominated for a long time by what Claude Raffestin has called “the eye’s totalitarianism” (Raffestin 1998, 13) – an ideology of the visual that has obstructed any polysensory approach to geographical environments. The fact that the very idea of landscape has been derived, as Anne Cauquelin has shown, from its representations in 15th century Western painting (Cauquelin 2000, 1; Barbanti 2018,63) has led in particular to a neglect of geography’s sonic dimension. The British geographer Douglas Pocock observed in 1989: “Sound is a neglected dimension in geographical study and in environmental aesthetics” (Pocock 1989, 193), and Susan Smith, five years later, writes that geography is “pervaded” by “silence” (Smith 1994, 232). It was not until Murray S. Schafer’s “world soundscape project” that geographical discourse witnessed an auditory turn and that the sonic dimension of geographical environments gained attention (Truax 1984, Thompson 1988, Corbin 1998, Krause 2002, Sterne 2003, Coates 2005, Bijsterveld 2013) and scholars like Frédéric Roulier advocated a “geography of sonic environments” (Roulier 1999).

Other than geography, literature and poetry have always been attentive to the sounds of places, and also Nabokov makes places “aurable and audible” (Bijsterveld *et alii* 2013, 32), when, for example, he employs the chirping and stridulating of crickets and cicadas as the sonic

¹ *Landscape*, for instance, etymologically evokes, as Mitchell Akiyama observes, the tactile (“Transparent Listening: Soundscape Composition’s Objects of Study.” *RACAR* 35, 1, 2010, 55).

geographical markers of Southern France and the Crimea or the jingling bells of sheep as the sound marks of alpine meadows in Switzerland. At the same time, however, these sounds are more than accessories that vaguely convey a geographical environment. As Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue point out, “as soon as a sound physically exists, it sets into vibration a defined space” (Augoyard and Torgue 2006, 11). Sounds have an impact on the environment in which they occur, as do the “tintinnabulations” (Nabokov 2006, 36) of the sheep bells that Martin, the protagonist of *Glory*, becomes aware of on one of his rambles on the mountain slopes in Switzerland:

A babbling metallic tinkling, of unknown origin and of unknown direction, would gradually become audible. Floating nearer, it enveloped the listener, giving him an odd tickling sensation in the mouth. Then, in a cloud of dust, came flowing a gray, curly, tightly packed mass of sheep rubbing against each other, and the moist, hollow tinkling of the bells, which delighted all of one’s senses, mounted and swelled so mysteriously that the dust itself seemed to be ringing as it billowed above the moving backs of the sheep. ... Then the tintinnabulation would change timbre, and once more grow hollower and softer, but for a long time it would hang in the air together with the dust.

(Nabokov 2006, 36)

Sound’s impact on the physical environment lends Martin’s experience an intermodal and multisensory character that evokes Roberto Barbanti’s notion of “vibratory ecosophy” (Barbanti 73). Sound waves transform dust into vibrant matter; particles of the landscape itself become the medium by which sound is propagated, by which its life is prolonged and by which its changing textures are articulated as it fades away. Sound becomes an integral part of the landscape, which is, to use Sophie Arquette’s formulation, “etched on to the sound: extending a sound’s natural life, filtering out frequencies or amplifying its internal fluctuations” (Arquette 2004, 161). Landscape can be listened to and be experienced holistically as a vibratory context.

Physical environments, whether real and geographically verifiable or part of “invent[ed]” worlds (Nabokov 1982, 5), are always sonic environments, shaped by the sounds that they emit, by the sounds that set them into vibration, and by the experience of these sounds. In the following, I am going to examine Nabokov’s construction of sonic geographies – urban and rural sonic environments and that of the outdoors – as soundscapes. The term soundscape, originally coined by Michael Southworth (Southworth 1969) and adopted by Murray Schafer to denote the “acoustic environment” (Schafer 1993, 4), will be used in Emily Thompson’s sense, i.e. as “simultaneously a physical environment and a way of *perceiving* that environment” (Thompson 1988, 2).

Urban and Rural Soundscapes.

The Immigrants’ City

Addressing the sonic dimension of geographical places and of cities in particular, has been a common practice with early twentieth century writers. A prominent example is Robert Musil who, in the opening chapter of *Man Without Qualities* (1930), captures the soundscape of Vienna. Nabokov as well is concerned with the specific sonic dimension of urban settings. Luzhin in *The Luzhin Defense* remembers awakening on the morning after his return from his family’s country estate to the “burst of military music” (Nabokov 1990b, 171): “it approached in orange waves, was interrupted by the hurried beat of a drum, and soon everything died down, and in place of the puffed-out sounds of trumpets came again the imperturbable clapping of hoofs and the subdued rattling of a St Petersburg morning” (171). In *Glory*, Cambridge resounds with the “[I]mpid chimes [that] called back and forth from tower to tower; the din of motors, the crepitation of wheels, and the tinkle of bicycle bells [that] filled the narrow streets” (Nabokov 2006, 50), and in “Cambridge,” an essay dating from 1921, Nabokov contemplates the city’s soundscape at dusk: “And now the bells begin to chime through the whole city ... Round, silvery sounds, distant, near, drift by, intercrossing in the sky; and, having hung like a magic net above the crenellated towers for a few moments, they disperse, melt lingeringly, near, distant, into the narrow, misty lanes, into the beautiful night sky, into my heart” (Nabokov 2019, 6). What Nabokov calls “magic net” is the

interaction of the various bells' complex sound patterns, each consisting of an interplay of fundamental frequency, overtone, partial tone, individual volume and the so-called virtual pitch that is invoked in the listener's ear. The intersection of chimes – of their sounds' undulating and propagating, of the changing texture of their sound patterns as the partial tones fade away – constitutes Cambridge's unique evening soundscape.

An urban sonic environment on which Nabokov elaborates in particular is that of Berlin. "The noise grew louder, flooded in, a pale cloud enveloped the window, a glass rattled on the washstand. A train had passed by and now the empty railway tracks could be seen fanning out from the window. Berlin, gentle and misty, toward evening, in April" (Nabokov 2007, 92). In his opening to Chapter 10, the narrator of *Mary* epitomizes the sonic environment of the novel's protagonist, which is mainly determined by the trains' din. Frau Dorn's *pension* where Ganin lives, is described as an unpleasant place, crowded and untidy, and "chiefly nasty because all day long and much of the night the trains of the *Stadtbahn* could be heard, creating the impression that the whole building was slowly on the move" (Nabokov 2007, 8), and Ganin "could never rid himself of the feeling that every train was passing, unseen, right through the house itself" (2007, 11):

It would come in from the far side, its phantom reverberation would shake the wall, jolt its way across the old carpet, graze a glass on the washstand, and finally disappear out of the window with a chilling clang – immediately followed by a cloud of smoke billowing up outside the window, and as this subsided a train of the *Stadtbahn* would emerge as though excreted by the house... It was as if an iron draft kept always blowing through the house. (11)

Nabokov reminds the reader of the etymological relationship between *noise* and *nausea* (Coates 2005, 644) and the qualitative affinities of noise and "nuisance" (Solomos 2013, 87): noise is in *Mary* "disruptive", chaotic", "unwanted" (Kahn 2001, 20), "sound matter out of place" (Kim-

Cohen 2009, 112)² and “aural assault” (Hendy 2014, 84). Accompanied by “a pale cloud [that] enveloped the window” (Nabokov 2007, 92) and “heaving mountains of smoke [that] swept upward, blotting out the night sky... [and] seemed to pass right through the house” (2007, 113), the din of the trains evokes the traditional association of noise and dirt (Kahn 2001, 77), of noise and pollution, that has shaped the discourse of the noise abatement movement. The noise of the trains, which penetrates the walls and forces its way through the room constitutes the soundscape of Ganin’s Berlin, as do the noises that intrude his room from indoors: “Then in the middle of the night his neighbor Alfyorov started to hum a tune. Through the thin wall he could hear him shuffling across the floor, first near, then moving away, while Ganin lay in anger. Whenever a train rattled past, Alfyorov’s voice blended with the noise, only to surface again ...” (Nabokov 2007, 26). Likewise, Fyodor in *The Gift*, like Ganin an immigrant and living under similar circumstances, is exposed to the noises produced by the other lodgers of Madame Chernyshevski’s apartment. He wakes up every morning to the noises of his landlady’s and the other inhabitants’ routine and is “guided out of his slumber by the same sound[s] behind the thin wall, such as “the clean, round-bottomed ring of a tumbler being replaced on a glass shelf”, and “the sound of flushed water, choking, groaning, and abruptly ceasing, then the bizarre internal whine of a bath tap” (Nabokov 1988, 137).

Despite its noises, however, Berlin’s soundscape doesn’t emerge from Nabokov’s writings as that of “dissonant modernism,” whose chief feature is, in the words of James Donald, “the brutal and deafening sound of the machinery of mass production” (Donald 2007, 30), as in Ilya Ehrenburg’s *The Life of the Automobile* (1929) or in the writings of Georg Simmel. Nabokov doesn’t pursue a Marxist approach to noise; he is not concerned with the sound of alienation that turns the city into a hostile place, but with a sonic urban environment that is shaped by sounds perceived and produced by immigrants. As I’ve shown elsewhere,³ Nabokov’s elaborations on

² Discussions of noise in terms of an out-of-placeness like Seth Kim-Cohen’s (*In the Blink of an Ear*. New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2009, 111-112, David Hendy’s (*Noise. A Human History of Sound and Listening*. London: Profile Books, 2014, viii) or Jan-Friedrich Missfelder’s (“Period Ear. Perspektiven einer Klanggeschichte der Neuzeit.” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 38,1, 2012, 42) draw on Mary Douglas’ definition of dirt as “matter out of place” (*Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge, 1988, 36).

³ Sabine Metzger, “Undulations and Vibrations, Tonality and Harmonies: Nabokov, Acoustics, and the Otherworld.” Marie Bouchet, Julie Loison-Charles, Isabelle Poulin (eds.). *The Five Senses in Nabokov’s Works*. London: Palgrave

noise, particularly in *Mary*, articulate his keen interest in and awareness of sound's physical dimension, such as sound transmission and sound propagation. But noise in *Mary* also functions as a social marker of the underprivileged neighborhood in which Ganin's *pension* is located - an area, where tenements are overcrowded and equipped only with thin walls that expose its inhabitants not only to the noises from the outside, but also and to those from within. Nabokov's Berlin soundscape is made up by sounds to which immigrants are exposed, and by sounds to which they are susceptible. The nameless narrator of "A Letter That Never Reached Russia" confesses: "I like to hear a man coming home. The man himself is not visible in the darkness, and you never know beforehand which front door will come alive to accept a key with grinding condescension, swing open, pause, retain by the counterweight, slam shut" (Nabokov 1997, 138). The unlocking of a front door, to which the narrator listens in a nocturnal street, acquires the character of a sound performance that he savors from the inserting of the key to the slamming of the door. The sound of a man "coming home" attracts the attention only of someone who hasn't got a home, and for whom the sound of unlocking and locking a front door is synonymous with having a home and being emplaced.

But Nabokov's Berlin soundscape is shaped as well by sounds which are produced by immigrants. Commenting upon Martin's visit to the city in 1923 the narrator of *Glory* observes: "But perhaps the most unexpected thing about this new, much expanded, post-war Berlin, so peaceful, rustic and bumbling, compared to the compact and elegant city of Martin's childhood, was the free-mannered, loud-voiced Russia that chattered everywhere, in the trams, in the shops, on street corners, on the balconies of apartment houses" (Nabokov 2006, 110 – 111). The presence of speakers of Russian in the urban sonic environment evokes what James Donald calls "the image of the metropolis as a modern Babel" (Donald 23), which is, in late 19th and early 20th century novels frequently accompanied by a denigration of the immigrants' voices as intrusive and inarticulate (Schweighauser 2006, 62). Writing from an immigrant's perspective, Nabokov, again, diverges from the literary tradition. The Russians are "loud", but not "noisy," and for Martin, himself a native of Russia, their voices do not constitute the aurality of the cultural other but

MacMillan, 2020, 275–293, as well as "Dark Chambers: Nabokov and the Second Sense." *Nabokov Online Journal*, XIII, 2019.

represent the “sounds of a community” (Gluck 2005), of which he himself is a part. Martin is “excited” by the “elements of expatriation” (Nabokov 2006, 114): they introduce a linguistic diversity and hybridity to Berlin’s soundscape and anticipate the city’s status as a liminal or transitional zone on his way to Zoorland. The voices of the Russian immigrants that have come to shape the urban soundscape also function as a historical marker, since their presence is the audible trace or reverberation of the Russian Revolution and the migration it triggered.

Hybrid Soundscapes

Mary contrasts the noisy environment of Ganin’s *pension* with the sounds of rural Russia. The environment of his family’s mansion where Ganin spent the summers during his youth, however, doesn’t form a “rural soundscape” in Murray S. Schafer’s sense of the term: Schafer’s rural soundscape is “hi-fi” (whereas the city’s, with its density of sound is “low-fi”); it is composed of the sounds of manual farm work (Schafer cites an episode from Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* as an example) and of animal voices. The rural soundscape forms, according to Schafer, a “quiet ambiance”, composed of animal voices and the sounds of manual farm work and (Schafer 1993, 44), untainted by the sound of technology, and transpierced merely by the post horn, the horns of the hunters and church bells. Having emerged from an ecologically biased, anti-modernist and anti-consumerist agenda in the 1970s, Schafer’s concept of the rural soundscape is, along with his notion of the soundscape in general, as Ari Kelman contends, the expression of an “urban prejudice” (Kelman 2010, 217) and a “fundamental hostility to the way the city sounds” (Sterne 2013, 187). Convalescent Ganin also listens to the “[w]onderful sounds” (Nabokov 2007, 38) which enter his sickroom from the manorial park: “twittering, distant barking, a creaking pump” (38). However, this medley of animal voices and sounds of manual work are not the only sounds giving shape to the sonic environment. In fact, the countryside where Ganin spends his vacations is cultured and cultivated: It is an environment where the architecture of country houses, like the deserted “Alexandrine country mansion” (70), replicates of city residences and where the sounds of nature and those of culture intermix. *Alexandrine*, the metaphor that evokes neo-classicist architecture in sonic terms, indicates the heterogenous soundscape of a rural setting to which the upper class has imported urban elements and their sounds, as, for instance, the “opera bass from

Petersburg” (54) who, hired by the owner of the local mill, is instructing the choir of the village school. But as well the technological innovations of the pre-revolutionary Russia make themselves audible. Telegraph poles have not only changed the face of the countryside; their “humming” (57) has also added “technophony” (Krause 2016, 44), the sound of technology, to the rural sonic environment. What is contrasted with the soundscape of Ganin’s noisy Berlin neighborhood is not an idealized soundscape of a pastoral Russian countryside, but the soundscape of rural Russia in the summer of 1915 *as perceived* by a privileged youth who has fallen in love for the first time and leads otherwise an unencumbered life. Nabokov’s soundscapes are idiosyncratic and highly dependent on his characters’ individual ways of perceiving them – on their individual aesthetic susceptibilities, their specific moods, and the specific circumstances under which they perceive sonic environments that escape any dichotomization. *Mary*’s rural soundscape is, above all, hybrid: mingling the rural and the urban – biophony, anthropophony and technophony – and juxtaposing the “humming telegraph pole” (Nabokov 2007, 57) to the humming of bees and to the sound of animals in the stables, the “steady roar of the sluice gates at the water mill” (69) to the voice of the opera singer, and the “whisper” (54) of a bicycle tire to the “particularly noisy” (82) rain.

The soundscape of the country is marked by hybridity, and so is that of the city. Despite *Mary*’s elaborations on the *Stadtbahn*’s din, Berlin isn’t a homogeneously noisy sonic environment – neither in *Mary* nor in Nabokov’s other fictions. The city has its quiet times and its quiet spaces, and noise can function as a social marker only when there are areas unaffected by din as well. At a time when, with the increasing urbanization that was triggered by the industrial revolution cities grew noisier, silence has become, as Sophia Rosenfeld observes, a “commodity” and a “luxury” (Rosenfeld 2011, 323), available only to the affluent, who could, like Albinus *Laughter in the Dark*, afford to live in an upper-class neighborhood, and who were catered for by a growing market of sound insulation devices. Whereas Ganin in his shabby pension is tortured by the *Stadtbahn*’s din, in *Laughter in the Dark* Albinus’ daughter Irma listens in her nocturnal sickroom for “the friendly rumble of the electric train” (Nabokov 1960, 158). The city is interspersed with areas that are not only quiet, but also leave room for natural sounds to make themselves audible. Franz, in *King, Queen, Knave*, lives like Albinus in a “quiet quarter” (Nabokov 1989, 67), and when, in Chapter 11, the narrator remarks: “everything outside was gurgling, murmuring, breathing” (215),

the *outside* doesn't refer to a rural environment, but to the Grunewald, where Dreyer's villa is situated, during a summer rainstorm.

The city has its "wild spaces" as well. Near the end of *The Gift*, Fyodor describes one of his morning rambles through the Grunewald's "still wild edge" (Nabokov 1988, 301), that leads him, past the litter left behind by Sunday excursionists and past occasional city dwellers seeking recreation, to "its depths, "to wild secret spots" (303) and their soundscape:

He walked between the bushes, listening to the vibration of the insects and the rustling of the birds. A wren crept like a mouse through the foliage of a small oak; a sand wasp flew by low down, carrying a benumbed caterpillar. The squirrel he had just seen climbed up the bark of a tree with a spasmodic, scrabbly sound. (305)

If the Grunewald is the place, as Stephen Blackwell argues, where boundaries are oppugned (Blackwell 1999, 604 -605), this holds as well for the forest's sonic dimension. The environment which Fyodor conceives of as "primeval paradise" (Nabokov 1988, 303) and which is located, as the narrator reminds the reader "within two miles from Agamemnon Strasse" (303), comes – despite its being located in the heart of the city – close to what is generally referred to as "wild soundscape" or the "natural quiet" (Coates 2005, 652), were it not for the sporadic voices of sunbathing nudists nearby. It is a sonic environment that is shaped by biophony and that makes the sounds emitted by individual creatures discernible, such as the insects' buzzing, rodents rustling through the leaves, and the voices of "orioles, pigeons and jays" (Nabokov 1988, 301) whose sounds Fyodor renders onomatopoeically.⁴ With its "natural quiet," the forest biotope in the Grunewald becomes a miniature version of wilderness that, albeit merely a "spot" (303), has for Fyodor the potential to evoke the wild regions of his father's last expedition: "Fyodor imagined his father's isolation in other forests – gigantic, infinitely distant, in comparison with which this one was but brushwood, a tree stump, rubbish. And yet he experienced something akin to that Asiatic freedom spreading wide on the maps, to the spirit of his father's peregrinations" (305).

⁴ It should be noted that the onomatopoeias, such as the "*kshoo, kshoo, kshoo*" of the crow's wings or the forest grasshopper's "*tsig-tsig-tsig*" (301) are, strictly speaking, those of Nabokov's translator Michael Scammel.

And as a miniature version of wilderness, it has as well the potential to expand into the wild soundscape of the East.

Sculpting the Soundscape of the Wild East

When Fyodor in *The Gift* “conjure[s] up” (Nabokov 1988, 111) his father’s last expedition, he not only evokes the deserts, the plains, and the mountains of the East visually, but also sonically. The East emerges from Fyodor’s narrative as a wild soundscape, whose wildness is emphasized by the fact that from his otherwise minute account of his father’s journey human voices are strangely absent, and neither rendered in direct nor in indirect speech. Instead, the landscapes speak with their geophonies and their biophonies, as, for example, a cataract in the Tyan-Shan range:

The boom of water in the gorge was enough to stun a man; head and breast filled with electric agitation; the water rushed with awesome force ... then suddenly swelled out monstrously as it reached the rapids Falling over the lustrous brows of the stones with a furious roar; and then, crashing from a height of twenty feet ... it ran farther, now changed: seething, smoke blue and snowlike from the foam, it struck first one side of the conglomeratic canyon in such a way that it seemed the mountain fastness could never withstand it. (111)

The gorge becomes a huge natural resonating body with the rock faces of the ravine functioning like soundboards resounding with the reverberations of the water’s roar. Fyodor is aware of the composite character of the gorge’s sonic environment that juxtaposes the thunder of the water to the “blissful quiet ... [of] its banks” where “the irises were in bloom” (111), and he discerns the textures and layers of sound, such as the “clatter of sliding stones” (112) caused by the caravan and the “clear ring of [the animals’] shoeing” that “resounds *above* the ample noise of water” (112). Fyodor evokes the mountains of the East as what Murray Schafer calls a “hi-fi soundscape” (Schafer 1993, 43), and this holds as well for the acoustic environments of the desert he describes. Commenting on “the quiet sands of the desert Gobi” he claims that “all that was audible in the velvet air was the laboured, quickened breathing of the camels and the scrape of

their broad hooves” (Nabokov 1988, 114), and in the desert Lob (whose Chinese name translates as *auricle*) “[i]n the evenings the harmonious, melodic sounds of swan flights reverberated through the silence” (118).

Not only the acoustic structure of geographical zones makes itself audible, but also the change of seasons. In a passage highly resonant of Nekrasov, Fyodor describes how spring announces itself by a *symphonia* of biophony and geophony: “Spring awaited us in the mountains of Na-Shan. Everything foretold it: the babbling of the water in the brooks, the distant thunder of the rivers, the whistle of the creepers which lived in the holes on the hillsides, the delightful singing of the local larks.” (114) What could be called Fyodor’s version of Nekrasov’s “The Sound of Green” at the same time indicates the status of his Eastern soundscapes. The thundering of cataracts, the clattering of debris, and the sound of a bird’s wing stroke are sounds that neither Fyodor nor his creator ever witnessed – at least not in the deserts and mountains of the East. In reconstructing the soundscapes of his father’s expedition, Fyodor performs what Nabokov calls “map[ping]” (Nabokov 1982, 1) and exploring “invent[ed]” worlds (1982, 5). The biophonies and the geophonies of the East are imagined sounds; they belong to the order of *phonomnesis*, which Augoyard and Torgue define as sounds that are “not actually heard” (Augoyard and Torgue 85) but imagined and remembered, by Fyodor and by writers before him, for Fyodor imagines and remembers sounds that themselves have arisen from the *phonomnesis* of the writers who serve him as sources. The novel’s overt intertextuality and Fyodor’s drawing on numerous texts has been well documented (Paperno 1992, Greenleaf 1994, Zimmer 2002, Zimmer and Hartmann 2007, Manolescu 2008, Leving 2011). Despite the absence of anthropophony, Fyodor’s Eastern soundscape abounds with literary voices, and the presence of Nekrasov’s in the vernal sounds of the Na-Shan mountains is not the only example. Commenting on the Desert Lob, Fyodor states: “Just as I heard in the Tibetan gorge the interesting drum-like roar which frightened our first pilgrims in the desert during the sandstorms I also saw and heard the same as Marco Polo” (Nabokov 1988, 118).

Imagining the sounds that he imagines his father to have heard, Fyodor makes the East resound with sounds that had been heard by, listened to, imagined and written down by others: poets, naturalists, adventurers and travel writers. These voices, each of them resonant with

phonomnesis, reverberate in *The Gift*'s Eastern soundscapes which consequently dissolve the boundary between nature and culture, between nature's sounds and anthrophony. *Phonomnesis*, which *The Gift* addresses *en passant* in the ability of Fyodor's father "to hum a whole opera, from the beginning to the end" (178), plays a central role in musical composition. The East's soundscapes emerge from Fyodor's reconstruction of the expedition as soundscape compositions or as "sound sculptures," which Bernie Krause describes as "the sculpting of sound as artists in any 'hard' form (clay, metal, ceramic, etc.) do" (Krause 2016, 198). Just as sound artists shape sculptures out of previously recorded sounds, Fyodor employs *phonomnesis* – sounds imagined, remembered and "recorded" in poems, travel narratives, and naturalists' accounts – out of which he sculpts, in in the Grunewald, the "wild" soundscapes of the East. *The Gift*'s soundscape of Asian mountains and deserts are sound sculptures which are, by their compositional character and by their vitiating the boundary between natural sound and anthrophony, as hybrid as the soundscape of the "wild spot" in the heart of the city where they are conceived.

Soundscapes of Repression

In *Bend Sinister* and in "Tyrants Destroyed," Nabokov examines the life under authoritarian regimes as well as their employment of sonic effects, and soundscape becomes a means to articulate what has been identified as the novel's and the story's dystopian character (Toker 1989, 178; Dragunoiu 2001, 67; Hamrit 2003, 161; Norman 2009, 50). The landscape surrounding Maximov's *datcha*, where Krug in *Bend Sinister* takes a stroll with David is devoid of the sounds that usually participate in the makeup of rural soundscapes. The "silent damp wood" (Nabokov 1990a, 93) through which Krug walks with his son is a synecdoche of "the silence of a shriveled world" (93), where oppositional voices are muted or silenced, where *audire* is *obaudire*, and audition is, to use Steven Goodman's words, "policed and mobilized" (Goodman 2012, 189). The all-pervading silence, in which it is even almost impossible to make an empty bottle found at the roadside burst audibly with "a beautiful bang" (Nabokov 1990a, 94), is punctured by the "roar" (96) of a radio loudspeaker transmitting Paduk's "nasal tones, prodigiously magnified" (96) as well as the "clatter of applause" (97) accompanying his speech. In the novel's fictive authoritarian state, the "village radio" (97), transmitting the dictator's voice, has assumed the status of the

“village bells” (Corbin 1998, *passim*.) that dominated, according to Alain Corbin, the 19th century rural soundscape. The voice of political propaganda, technologically reproduced and amplified, shapes the sonic environments of both the city *and* the country and constitutes what can be called a “soundscape of repression.” During the run-up to a farcical election, Paduk’s henchmen support acoustically a group of candidates that had been selected by the government: “[S]pecial agents, called ‘*megaphonshchiki*’ [...] boosted the civic virtue of their candidates at street corners, thus creating the illusion of a hectic election fight” (Nabokov 1990a, 168 – 169). The neologism *megaphonshchiki*, translating “megaphone-armed ‘backers’” (168), underlines the link between sound amplification and combat, and the pivotal function of sound reinforcement technology as a “weapon” in the regime’s acoustic conquest of public space. Nabokov has witnessed the Nazis’ *Machtergreifung* (Shrayer 1999, 134; Norman 2009, 50), and, with it, their utilization of technically transmitted sound in the urban space. Hitler has observed that “sound is more suggestive than image” and emphasized what he called “the magic force of the spoken word” (quoted in Birdsall 36), and the *Lautsprecherwagen* and the radio, broadcasting life speeches and mass events, were crucial instruments in establishing the Nazi party’s acoustic presence in public space and in the formation of the *homo nationalis* (Balibar 12; Birdsall 34; Thompson 2004, 207).

Nabokov’s experience of the Nazi soundscape and its utilization of technologically transmitted and amplified sound for mass persuasion seems to have informed “Tyrants Destroyed,” published in 1938, in which a nameless narrator outlines his life under a farcical totalitarian regime run by his former school mate. The story is concerned with propaganda strategies and with acoustic propaganda strategies in particular. The narrator describes, for instance, the regime’s dominating public space visually by an “orgy of banners” (Nabokov 1997, 458) during the parade on the occasion of the dictator’s fiftieth birthday which he observes from his window. The regime, however, manifests its presence as well acoustically, and like Hitler, the dictator in “Tyrants Destroyed” is aware of sound’s potential for establishing presence in the urban space. The story and is centered around the narrator’s experience of the transmission of a speech which the dictator delivers at “a groundbreaking ceremony for a new, multistoried greenhouse” (454):

For two hours the enormous voice thundered throughout our city, erupting with various degrees of force from this or that window, so that, if you walk along a street (which, by the way, is deemed a dangerous discourtesy: sit and listen), you have the impression that he accompanies you, crashing down from the rooftops, squiring on all four between your legs, and sweeping up again to peck at your head, cackling, cowing, and quacking in a caricature of human speech, and you have no place to hide from the Voice, and the same thing is going on in every city and village of my successfully stunned country. (454–455)

The passage is more than an example of the dictator's *Redewut* or "mania for speaking out"; it deals with the impact of monopolized radio broadcasting on the city's and, by extension, on the country's soundscape. The narrator describes the regime's use of technologically transmitted sound to conquer public space and to create acoustic omnipresence. Sound is, as Carolyn Birdsall in her study on *Nazi Soundscapes* observes, "suited to the task of establishing presence since it does not respect borders between public and private life and travels beyond the field of vision" (Birdsall 2012, 36). In "Tyrants Destroyed", the radio broadcast of the leader's speech makes political propaganda penetrate the citizens' homes and, transgressing the confines of the private sphere, invade public space and thus insonify the city. The windows emitting the Voice's sound from the houses' inside into the streets function like loudspeakers that multiply and reinforce its presence and turn the city as a built and inhabited environment into a medium or "*instrumentarium*" (Augoyard and Torgue 2006, 6) that blurs the boundary between private space and public space. Private listening is at the same time a public and collective listening, and what the narrator listens to is, strictly speaking, not only the dictator's voice on the radio, but as well his fellow citizens listening to the voice. The narrator witnesses the listening of a crowd that constitutes itself by its individual members audibly listening simultaneously to the same radio broadcast. What is at the center of "Tyrants Destroyed" is an experience of "affirmative resonance" which Carolyn Birdsall defines as a "practice or event when a group of people communally create sounds that resonate in a space, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of their group and its identity pattern" (Birdsall 34). Affirmative resonance has a central function in establishing the acoustic

dominance of public space and in the shaping of the urban soundscape, serving as an instrument of mass persuasion, or, as the narrator puts it, of “successfully stunn[ing] the country” (Nabokov 1997, 455). Affirmative resonance creates a ubiquity effect, which gives the impression that the Voice is omnipresent and inescapable, pursuing and enveloping the narrator, and which can be seen as the chief feature of the story’s soundscape of repression. As Augoyard and Torgue observe, “the ubiquity effect introduces a fundamental asymmetry between the sender and the receiver, the power that takes advantage of it is based on a rupture of the possibility of exchange. ... listeners are placed in the exclusive position of the receiver ... and are forced into silence” (Augoyard and Torgue 139).

“Everything is full of him” (Nabokov 1997, 457), the narrator remarks: “Tyrants Destroyed” dramatizes ubiquity by highlighting sound’s capacity to transgress not only the borderlines between private and public and between inside and outside, but as well the boundaries of the self. The auditory, as Wolfgang Welsch puts it, “admits” (Welsch 1997, 158) the world, consequently, “penetration, vulnerability and exposure are the characteristics of hearing ... Hearing is a sense of extreme passibility, and we cannot escape from acoustic congestion” (Welsch 1997, 158). Whereas vision is separate from its object (Espinet 2016, 199) and an abolition of distance makes vision fail, the hearing and the heard coincide (Vögelin 2010, 49, 175; Espinet 2016, 199) to the extent that, as David Espinet contends, “the hearing has the heard rather *in* the ear” (Espinet 2016, 199). Therefore, the narrator concludes “by killing myself I would kill him, as he was totally inside me” (Nabokov 1997, 457). Ironically, the suicide that the narrator contemplates would turn out to be a deceptive act of resistance, abetting the silencing intended by the soundscape of repression.

Conclusion

Nabokov is well aware of sound’s impact on physical environments, of their being sculpted by the sounds they emit, of the sounds that set them into vibration, and of the experience of these sounds. In his fiction, geographies, whether real or invented, are always sonic geographies, and landscapes and urban environments emerge as soundscapes.

Nabokov rejects the topoi of dissonant modernism and urban hostility and creates soundscapes that defy any dichotomization. The sonic environment of Berlin and of the Russian countryside are hybrid soundscapes, mingling anthrophony and biophony, technophony and geophony. In *The Gift*, the sounds of the Wild East emerge from wild sounds of Berlin's hybrid sonic environment. Fyodor's soundscapes of Eastern deserts and mountains have the status of sound sculptures that are shaped out of *phonomnesis* – sounds imagined, remembered and “recorded” in poems, travel writings and naturalists' accounts.

Having witnessed the Nazi's *Machtergreifung*, Nabokov has been well aware of an authoritarian regime's utilization of technologically transmitted sound in the urban space. *Bend Sinister* and in “Tyrants Destroyed” inquire into the soundscapes of repression and their use of radio broadcasting and amplified sound to create affirmative resonance and sonic ubiquity.

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