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“Submitting love?” A Sensory Sociology of Southbourne

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Abstract

This article seeks to remember the Southbourne building of Sheffield Hallam University, UK, which housed students, academics, and administrative staff until August 2014. Data was collected from an ethnographic observation study of students handing in completed coursework. Findings are presented in the form of an audio ‘soundscape’ and a literary narrative. It is argued that these hypermodal tools should form a growing part of qualitative inquiry as sensory social research. The historic application and practical impediments of such sensorial and aural techniques are discussed, alongside the challenge they provide to the received practices concerning how journal articles can be experienced.

Keywords

academic communication, sensory sociology, space and place, soundscapes

Bio

Jon Dean is a lecturer in politics and sociology at Sheffield Hallam University. His scholarship focuses on creative and reflexive qualitative methods, youth volunteering and social class, and the political cultures of the USA in the 1960s.



Introduction

It is fair to say that the Southbourne building on Sheffield Hallam University's Collegiate Campus was unloved. Over the summer of 2014 this became eminently apparent, as Southbourne was sold to private developers and the academic functions it served moved to another location, a brand new and business-orientated open-plan office environment. The former home of sociology, politics, psychology, law, and criminology has gone, but before its demolition, its existence had already been forgotten. On the Sheffield Hallam University website (2014a) there was no information provided for students to learn about what went on inside Southbourne, almost as if it had been erased from the University's history before it was knocked down. The University's proposed walking tour of Collegiate Campus (Sheffield Hallam University, 2014b) did not even suggest looking at Southbourne, surprising given that it was home to two significant academic departments. Strangely, this tour guide at the time of

writing does recommend seeing and exploring two temporary prefabricated buildings, which house nothing of note.

This article seeks to use the developing focus on hypermodal inquiry to perform two functions: one historical and one methodological. Firstly, this paper emanates from an interdisciplinary research group who came together in May 2013 to explore and compare different academic approaches to understanding space and place. Using the Southbourne building as a central research site, this group of a dozen researchers (from fields such as education, architecture, art, planning, sociology, and cultural studies) aimed to study Southbourne, to understand its form and its life before it was demolished. Forming a small part of this collective, the research presented below aims to act as a tiny fragment of social history, a way of remembering a key interaction which took place inside a relatively unimportant building for several decades. By presenting a small ethnographic study of how students experience the practice of physically handing in their coursework, I want to bring to life a dying academic interaction and with it the sounds of a dying building. The idea that students should complete an essay or assignment, print it off at home or in the library, and bring it in to our department, having it stamped and recorded by administrative staff for academic staff to later grade and offer feedback, is disappearing and deserves recording.

The second purpose of this article is to consider the importance of sound in qualitative research and to introduce it to the form of the journal article. Technological developments and shifts in how sociologists work with the sensory provide researchers an opportunity to test new forms of communication in their academic output. This growing literature is discussed in the article, and, as a result, the article's empirical data about Southbourne is offered to the reader as both a textual and aural experience. A final discussion provides some practical ideas for how the hypermodal and the sensory can be utilised to a greater extent

within the communication of academic research, within a Higher Education sector experiencing a neoliberal crisis of identity.

The Development of a Sensory Sociology

Drawing on a sociology which “remarks on what is ignored” (Back, 2013), seeks to understand how “other senses affect social processes” (Rhys-Taylor, 2013a), and moves beyond the current “constraint of existing methods” (Berrens, 2013), a panel at the British Sociological Association’s annual conference in May 2013 sought to challenge sociology’s obsession with the verbal and the written, and instead address the smells and sounds of the social world. For instance, on that panel, Alex Rhys-Taylor played a sound recording he had created from the vibrancy of the Radley Road market in East London. Those of us listening in the audience could hear the chatter, buzz, and hubbub of customers and stall-owners as both went about their daily business, with the fractious cosmopolitan energy of such a street scene made evident. The piece served to explore the sensorial elements of space and society in order to communicate the lived experience of multiculturalism (see Rhys-Taylor [2014] for an exploration of the smells of that market).

Since the publication of *The Auditory Cultures Reader* (Bull and Back, 2003), sensory methodologies have gained in popularity with qualitative researchers (Pettinger & Lyon, 2012). This “sensory turn” (Rhys-Taylor, 2014) aims to move sociology beyond the verbal, the reliance on interviews and surveys, and move into a way of communicating research about people’s lives through sounds, smell, and the visual. As Law and Urry (2004) have argued, surveys and interviews are perhaps unsuited to grappling with global complexity, particularly those movements in social life which are fleeting, sensory, emotional, or kinaesthetic: “Sometimes sounds bring into mind places the viewer does not know, and collages and photo-animations stimulate new understandings of work” (Pettinger & Lyon, 2012).

This call for social research to move away from the interview and intertwine recordings, video, and photography is growing. It is increasingly important, as some authors have argued, that the interview and the survey method are becoming ever more co-opted by financially powerful, private organisations, which utilise them to understand their customer behaviour and further their customer loyalty (Savage & Burrows, 2007). The social science must make use of new forms of discovery. As Back (2009, p. 213) has written,

I have argued that social research needs to reduce its over-reliance on interviews and embrace the opportunities to re-think its modes of observation and analysis...Such a cosmopolitan method reworks the relationship between technology, art and critical social science in order to use new media to recalibrate the relationship between observers and observed...This also means research practice will not be limited by what is said or counted. Challenging the dominance of word and figure also invites the possibility of thinking research within the social relations of sound, smell, touch and taste. The ultimate aspiration of this sensuous and multimodal agenda for researching community is to create vital forms of research that can be faithful to the conflicts and the opportunities that arise in multicultural everyday life.

For example, Lyon and Back (2012) use the sounds of the market on Deptford High Street in south London to illustrate the social processes occurring among the work of local fishmongers, and the authors have developed a way to communicate the auditory nature of these processes. As the written text of their article gives the reader the contextual background, and the images help the viewer to visualize the setting, readers can click at various times through the article to “experience” the sounds of the encounter, such as a large

machete slicing effortlessly through a large silver fish, or into a well-worn wooden block.

Back (2009) tells the story of an East End community through the lives of fishmongers, and expresses how recording the sounds of these activities can aid understanding and exploration:

“...recording the soundscape of his stall and the exchanges that unfold in real time, reveal other dimensions of this social world. Contained in these recordings are rituals of sociality and banter...” (Back, 2009, p. 210).

Of course there are limitations to undertaking such a sensory sociology. Capturing the verbal is easier than capturing the sounds or smells of a space and then communicating them to others, with sound especially presenting ethical barriers. Pettinger (2011) in her work “The Silent Musician” has shown how the process of capturing performance is at once reductive, as the sound the musician is producing cannot be seen, yet also creates the opportunity for imaginative interaction. Further, due to the interpretive and potentially reductive nature of images, visual methods can struggle to produce an objective reality (Spencer, 2011). But to remove the sounds of the communities we research, when we have the opportunity not to, is itself a reductive practice, reporting back less than the totality of what was experienced. From a personal and professional developmental point of view, researchers have found that an awareness of sound in one piece of research will increase their use of soundscapes in another (Riach, 2010), demonstrating changes in our understanding of the possibilities of the (loosely termed) “imaginative” (Jacobsen, Drake, Keohane, & Petersen, 2014) or “inventive” methodologies (Lury & Wakeford, 2014) explored in very recent collections.

Developmentally, Hall, Lashua and Coffey (2008) argue for the increased centrality of sound in social inquiry, noting that noise is often absent or suppressed in social scientific accounts of everyday life, a result potentially damaging to research findings. The authors feel that, when there is aggregate noise in qualitative inquiry, the narrowness of the dominant interview method sidelines too much. In life, as in research, we often think of surrounding

noise as a backdrop, or as a cause of irritation, and instead concentrate on the central sound, which is the focus of our immediate attention. But the postgraduate interviewer is encouraged by research methods textbooks to undertake interviews in quiet, “soundproofed” surroundings (Hall et al., 2008), such as private offices or meeting rooms, thereby not only potentially taking the interview outside of its natural space, but purposefully relegating the aural in order to reproduce the interview in the future as a purely textual encounter. In transcriptions, sounds are considered as “shadow” events; in survey research, sounds are not usually even considered. But Lefebvre’s (2004) “rhythmanalysis” for instance sees sound as clues to the everyday processes going on around us, which it appears disingenuous and arrogant to ignore. This article will now go on to outline one small attempt to readdress this balance.

Methods: Soundscapes in Practice

While the technology does not yet exist for me to let you experience the tastes and smells of the Southbourne building beyond textual description (but imagine urinal cakes and cheesy crisps), nor what the textures of the building are like to touch, we are left with sight and sound - technology has made it thus far. So please read below a composite narrative from one day’s ethnographic research. It is recommended that this piece is read while listening to the composite soundscape, which can be accessed through clicking on the thumbnail picture below. The soundscape is a recording of the Southbourne building administrative Helpdesk made over the course of a single day in May 2013. I sat at the Helpdesk, and from 9am until 5pm watched students come to hand in their coursework. I saw how they interacted with the administrative staff on the desk and with the building, a space they would have encountered hundreds of times, and for many of whom, given the end of the academic year, it would be their last visit.

I use the term soundscape for the small audio file produced during this research. While landscapes give the viewer an overall picture of a setting (either interior or exterior), soundscapes aim to give the listener an overall auditory picture, exploring not every tiny detail, but the grander themes and key messages (Bull & Back, 2003; Shafer, 1977). As such, in their applications so far soundscapes, like visual anthropology, have proven to be a more representational and subjective form of reporting the social world, rather than following an objective or realist approach (Pink, 2006). While not a rigorous technique for systematic analysis, soundscapes “tell a story, create meaning or commentary, and help listeners reflect on what they hear” (Hall et al., 2008, p. 1030). They present the “ever-present array of noises, pleasant and unpleasant, loud and soft, heard or ignored, that we all live with” (Shafer, in Hall et al., 2008, p. 1030).

The data presented below is an attempt to explore the ambient sensoria (Rhys-Taylor, 2013b) that suffuse and effect individuals’ responses to both space and place, and social processes. The literary narrative presentation of the data aims to highlight the sounds that were drilled into my head over eight hours of fieldwork: the repetitive clunks of various pieces of office equipment, the relative banality yet constancy of student enquiries, and the constant whirr of the office environment as administrative staff went about their normal routines and students did something out of theirs. The keen-eared listener will occasionally hear my hand sweep across the page as I start writing a new line of fieldnotes; birdsong fluttering in from outside (1m50s), stray coughs from nervous and dry-throated students (2m30s), and the low hum of printers (1m17s and elsewhere), were all common reoccurring sounds throughout my observation and can all be heard here. The occasional greeting from Helpdesk staff and a few muttered lines of students’ dialogue (2m55s), provide some human presence to a sound recording that was purposefully kept free from specific human interactions for clear reasons of standard ethical practice.

The writing style is purposefully performative and creative, echoing the staccato nature of the interactions witnessed throughout the day. The pattern that emerged was sudden moments of emotion and energy, followed by longer stretches of ordinary, run-of-the-mill bureaucracy (to which I became desensitised after a while). In trying to communicate data in this way, this article is further tying into debates within academia, stretching back to C. Wright Mills' call for researchers to live up to their responsibility to continue a grand linguistic tradition and to "try and carry on the discourse of civilized man" (Mills, 1959, p. 222; see Dean, 2014). As Les Back (2007, p. 164) has elsewhere argued,

Mills was also clear that sociological imagination meant being self-consciously committed to affecting argument and writing creatively for a variety of what he called 'reading publics'. The danger he foresaw was that the sociological work might develop a technical language that turns inward on itself...To avoid this we have to aspire to make sociology more literary.

It is hoped that the below work lives up to this ideal, by presenting what Vannini, Ahluwalia-Lopez, Waskul, and Gottschalk (2010) label a somatic layered account. Here research is not only about the senses, but also through the senses and for the senses (Stoller, 1997), where a three-dimensional work can give readers, viewers, or listeners a way of feeling without being there (Vannini et al., 2010, p. 381). It is true that this attempt to inject the artistic or poetic into social science (Jacobsen et al., 2014) is of course limited by the author's own lack of skill as an artist or poet; but it is also true to posit that the quality of the ethnographic data is limited by the author's skill as an ethnographer. However, I draw confidence from Bloor's (2013) successful recent attempt to communicate highly complex sociological problems through poetry, specifically to raise issues in new and accessible ways (see BBC, 2012).

The Sounds of Southbourne



Click on the above image of Southbourne to play the soundscape. [CLICKING THIS FIGURE SHOULD LINK TO HYPERMODAL #1]

Beep! A barcode scanner.

Ka-rump. The date stamp.

Tsch-tsch. The stapler.

They turn up smiling and impatient. Students would march in, looking to get the process done as quickly as possible, but when they turn the corner to enter the Helpdesk area, there is an immediate halt. They weren't expecting to have to queue behind four or five people, and they stop, not wanting to bump into someone, which would force discussion or acknowledgement of another person.

“Are you in the queue?” “I’m not in the queue.”

Beep! Ka-rump. Tsch-tsch.

A really awkward desk height to lean over: far too low, so when the students had to fill in extra details, they were bent over, really uncomfortable and rather uncool, bottoms thrust out self-consciously.

Constant questions: “Have you got a pen?”, “Who’s my seminar tutor?”, “What’s the date?” all especially frequent refrains.

A sign on the wall reads Stressed about exams? We can help. It is possibly not the most subtle place to send out such a message, but highly prescient given the stress on display. The stress is surprising. “*You’re finished!*” I want to cry out, “*Why are you so tense about this?*”

Beep! Ka-rump. Tsch-tsch.

“Hold on to your receipt,” came the desperate cry from Helpdesk staff, as students strode to escape: past experience of the lost coursework, and the lost receipt, the cause of a heightened awareness of the possibility of tears, denials, and accusations. The receipt goes into the wallet, or is pushed into the jeans pocket, or stuffed into the handbag, without so much as a glance at the details of whether it’s right or not. I’ll take my chances, they seem to be thinking. The doors slam like thin heavy steel lids behind them, providing a fitting finality to their engagement with Southbourne.

Beep! Ka-rump. Tsch-tsch.

One student, a heavily-built white girl in blue, turns round from the desk, arms aloft. But these weren’t the solid and proud raised arms of a goal scoring footballer, or the disciplined military. They were the relieved and sagging arms, bent at the elbow, of the marathon runner, shiny with the sweat that comes from a warmer day. “I am so happy” she said, without much emotion either in her voice or on her face. A sheepish grin at this exclamation around other people, in an environment otherwise quiet, business-like and private, she sees her friend

sitting behind me. Walking wearily over to her, they pull phones out, possibly to organise a more fun future, or to find what they've missed out on during coursework-induced isolation. "Let's go!" they say to each other, and walk out the room half arm-in-arm, half touching, a rare show of physical contact, in this place where lecturers may be around.

Beep! Ka-rump. Tsch-tsch.

"Submitting, love?" the typical Northern term of affection used to soften the overly formal and formulaic process. It is astonishing, given that many students will have completed this process over a dozen times, how lost they look. "Submitting, love?" works to take them out of their misery, to indicate that the member of staff is available and can help, and that yes, the student has come to the right place, the same place they've been many times before.

"Y'alright?" is the other one, where the Helpdesk staff member clearly knows a student is lurking apprehensively, afraid to approach the desk (for rejection may offend). "Y'alright?" said in a sing-song voice, aimed at luring them, to keep the process moving.

Beep! Ka-rump. Tsch-tsch.

The sigh of relief. Two friends, male, three-quarter length shorts, t-shirts, sunglasses perched on similar haircuts, are submitting at the same time. "Pint," says one. It's not a question. It's more a statement, an expression of a shared forthcoming reality. "Beer time," nods the other in affirmation, and immediately the hands turn to pockets, pulling out mobile phones, to coordinate drinking plans. Who's where? Who else is there? What stage are they at? Have they finished yet? Come on! This is a day for sharing joy, after the shared tribulations. Phones out. Jab jab jab. That's done, now for fun.

There's an impatience in the air, a sense of being desperate to get this done. Are things the same for the Helpdesk staff? They're doing the same thing over and over and over again -

scanning, stamping, stapling - a hundred, two hundred, a thousand a day. It is far from the paperless office, as barcodes, coursework, and assignments get stacked in ever more precarious piles.

Beep! Ka-rump. Tsch-tsch.

“Y’alright?” “Yeah, just come to hand this in.”

The occasional young man or young woman look worried. Flushed faces from walking up the hill to get to Southbourne. “Not used to this exercise!” says one. What to do, what to do, what to do? All these other students handing coursework in, and I haven’t done it! They approach the desk. “Can I speak to someone about an extension please?” said in a low, quiet voice, not wanting to broadcast this admission of guilt that feels like failure. Warily, grimacing because they know it’s a bit late to be asking for extra time, the Helpdesk staff offer a simple “Take a seat,” nodding over at the dirty lime-green (and terribly uncomfortable) cloth box chairs. “I’ll see if someone’s around.”

Minutes pass. Other students wander in to hand in coursework and taste freedom. The student dying for extra time is hoping the ground will open up.

Beep! Ka-rump. Tsch-tsch.

Beep! Ka-rump. Tsch-tsch.

Discussion: Embedding the Hypermodal in Academic Forms

This article had one main and one subsidiary aim: firstly, to explain the growing call for incorporating the sensory into the social sciences and experiment with how this could be integrated into the communication of academic work; secondly, to provide a space for a morsel of collective memory and collective experience, which both colleagues and I feel is

being lost to the neoliberal university project, where personal interactions are diminished. Here emergent technology is a cause for both despair and hope.

On the despair, developments in technology and changes in the form of higher education delivery (with the increased prominence of MOOCs [massively online-only courses] being a key example) mean that the act of handing the hard copy of coursework in person may not exist for much longer. While the current generation of academics will have known nothing else, at Sheffield Hallam University it is increasingly rare for our current students to do so. Instead, they submit work over the Internet, through an online submission system. Further, academic staff does not need to print the work off, as they are able to type comments, highlight key sections and to provide feedback electronically. With the expansion of live lecture feeds over the Internet, nobody ever has to leave their bedroom in the twenty-first century university. It may be an exercise in nostalgic romanticism for me to mourn the dying of previous practices, of scribbling notes in the margin, of circling spelling errors, of scoring out irrelevant sentences. But those practices should be remembered, as should handing your work over to another human being; the very act of recording and reporting back these interactions, these “rituals of sociality” (Back, 2009: 210) will hopefully, at the very least, keep them fresh for future experience.

Yet in regard to hope, technology increasingly gives us the ability to embed sound and video in journal articles: with more and more people reading journal articles and books online, we require fewer and fewer journal issues and individual articles to be printed out. If publishers and web hosts are willing to accept these larger files and, possibly, the extra work involved in producing and formatting such outputs, is there the opportunity to go beyond what is presented above? Barring obvious ethical concerns around anonymisation, are there still barriers to including quotes direct from research participants, either the original recordings, or read by an actor or the author, rather than the textual reproduction of such

quotes from fieldwork. In short, why does the primary communication tool of academic work have to be textual? Developing hypermodal research methods and innovation in academic communication tools means that the current hegemonic forms of academic publishing can be challenged. As the idea of space as a limitation decreases and research can be accessed and catalogued differently, there is less need for the formalised ordering of academic content within a specific volume and issue, or the need for articles to be bound by word length or the number of pages. While five to eight may be the 'standard' number of articles within a journal, we have to ask if there is any logic within this continuing framework. The online journal *Sociological Research Online* regularly publishes over 15 peer-reviewed articles within an issue, all of which are free to access for individuals; other journals such as *Reconstruction*, *Journal of Research Practice*, and *Culture Machine* experiment with new forms of publishing academic content. Therefore, if we are willing to accept new models of consuming journals, we must rethink our attitude to consuming journal articles. The previous orthodoxy that articles are things to be read can be challenged; the reasons why research reports are not things to be heard and seen are diminishing.

As a final exemplar, the vivid descriptions of eating jellied eels from an East London café in Rhys-Taylor's (2013b) work are brought to life by the ethnographer-author's skill as a writer and storyteller. But the scenarios he is reporting are so real it feels a shame to only communicate them textually. When Rhys-Taylor explains in great detail the visceral nature of a London taxi driver sucking moist pieces of eel into his mouth, and dribbling chili vinegar down his chin, the reader can visualise and imagine such an encounter, but this article perhaps presents scope for developing this further. When Rhys-Taylor (2013c) appeared as a guest on BBC Radio 4's popular sociology show *Thinking Allowed* to talk about this research, the above scenario, described in the journal article through a narrative text, was read by an actor, as the programme attempted to inventively bring this ethnographic data to the

larger, but mostly lay, listening public. The actor played up the sensorial elements of the encounter, emphasizing the slippery and jellied nature of the foodstuff by elongating the ‘s’ sounds: eelsss, glisstening, sspilling, ssatisfied. This extra element to the academic work can turn what we all know can be laborious, dull, and stodgy writing (Mills, 1959) into a performance; just as the good ethnographer should view the everyday with a heightened “sensitivity to life” (Willis, 2000, p. xiv) as if one were perceiving art, hypermodal inquiry adds to the researcher’s toolbox, hopefully better representing social life, and offering possibilities for the communication of data beyond what the reader/listener currently has on offer.

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