

Book Review

Nicolai Jørgensgaard Graakjær:
The Sounds of Spectators at Football
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It is nearly 50 years since Murray Schafer first introduced the term 'soundscape' and laid down the ground rules for this new field of study. "An acoustic environment," he said, can be studied "just as we can study the characteristics of a given landscape" (1994 [1977], p. 7). Studying soundscapes is more challenging than studying landscapes, however. Sound cannot be held still in the way moving images can to study a single frame at leisure and, while the camera can capture the whole of a landscape, the microphone "samples details. It gives the close-up, but nothing corresponds to aerial photography" (Schafer, 1994 [1977], p. 7). Studying soundscapes requires becoming a part of them rather than observing them from a distance, becoming an 'earwitness': "A writer is trustworthy only when writing about sounds directly experienced and intimately known" (Schafer, 1994 [1977], p. 8).

This is what Nicolai Graakjær has done beautifully in his book on the soundscape of football matches (as well as in earlier work, for instance in his paper on the use of music in Abercrombie & Fitch fashion, Graakjær, 2012). From his seat in the stadium, Graakjær shared the excitement of the match but also took meticulous notes of the key features of the stadium soundscape – the spectators' chatter, their rhythmic shouting, clapping and singing, their booing, cheering and roaring, the referee's whistle, the music and recorded sounds from the stadium's PA system and more, all of this with close attention to the way these sounds wax and wane with the ups and downs of the game and, at times, stop altogether as spectators hold their breath when a goal seems near.

In the process, Graakjær's book reveals key differences between sound and vision. While vision isolates and individuates, sound incorporates and creates communion. The round space of the stadium reinforces this, "making the sounds ubiquitous independent of the spectator's position" (p. 55) and rhythm is fundamental as it creates what Condon has called 'rhythmic entrainment' (Hall, 1984), interactional synchrony, "emotional sharing and muscular bonding". It is rhythm that "gives crowds temporal form" (p. 77).

The most important contribution of this book is perhaps Graakjær's comparison between live and televised football. Televised football does not simply reproduce the live event. It transforms it, adding sounds which the spectator in the stadium cannot hear, such as the commentary, the 'stings' (brief musical or visual inserts) and the sound of striking the ball, picked up by highly directional microphones. It also positions the spectator differently, closer to the commentator and the action. And, above all, it turns the sounds of the stadium, so fundamental to the electric atmosphere of the stadium event, into a background for the sounds of the game, as picked up by a multitude of strategically placed microphones. As a result, the shared experience of the crowd, the "many-as-one" effect (Scannell, 2019, p. 78) is lacking, as is the spectator's ability to choose where to look, which is now managed by the director. In a fascinating account of televised football during the pandemic, when matches were played in empty stadiums, Graakjær shows how spectator sounds were added, drawing on libraries of pre-recorded cheers, chants,

and other sounds, including “special sounds for penalties, goals and fouls” (p. 109), a practice resembling the infamous canned laughter tracks of American television comedies.

If I have one comment, it would be this. Graakjær’s discussion of the literature, while extensive, thorough and scholarly (there is even a 15-page table charting the methods and findings of 51 books and papers on football spectators and football sounds), mostly focuses on literature dealing specifically with football. While Schafer is acknowledged, it does not position the book in the broader field of soundscape studies, nor explore the important theoretical issues it raises, for instance in relation to other forms of audience participation (e.g. in music), the role of sport in contemporary society or the transformation of face-to-face practices into multimodal texts, issues of which the book provides such an excellent example. When introducing the field of soundscape studies, Schafer wrote that “the acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce it and may tell us much about the trending and evolution of that society” (1994 [1977], p. 7) and argued for the importance of soundscape studies in relation to theorists of the new orality of contemporary society, such as McLuhan (e.g. 1962) and Ong (1982). Nevertheless, for anyone interested in exploring these broader issues, Graakjær’s book does provide a unique and detailed resource – and it is also a great example of the difficult art of capturing soundscapes in words.

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