COLLECTING THE NOISE/INTERPRETING THE NOISE

Walking through the city as a soundscape experience

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1. The idea of research - Let's walk

Let me take you for a walk around the city of Toruń: although typical urban environment in Central Europe nowadays, it is filled with the significant past of seven hundred years of history[1]. Through three thirty-minute trips in October 2018, we try to explore the soundscapes and the sound spaces of the modern city. To provide variety of urban aural experiences, we go through different locations and listen out for sounds, noises, music, murmurs, rustles, scratches, rumbling, and reverbs made by people, animals, or machines. Our trip starts from the main Market Square in the Old Town[2], a vivid tourist location, attractive for the residents, pupils, young people or shoppers, and explore the main routes of the Old Town usually walked by the pedestrians. As we bid farewell to the medieval tenement houses, we gradually move towards modern housing districts. It is a good choice for people who want to appreciate the tones of traffic jam, and the human sounds supplemented by and then dominated by noisy orchestrations of cars, vans and trams. I

[1] Toruń is the city of 200 000 population, located in the North part of central Poland. It is a significant academic center with Nicolaus Copernicus University of 27 000 students. The Old Town was enlisted on the UNESCO list of monuments and places, and it has well-preserved medieval buildings, such as the Town Hall coming back to 14th century and numerous churches or tenement houses and distinctive spatial organization.

[2] The main locations in which the recordings took place are presented in the photographs and short video files below.

propose to enjoy these routes since they represent the most popular pedestrian paths of Toruń: there are main road hubs available within walking distance from the Old Town Market Square, numerous services and commercial places. Passing the main streets, namely Różana to Rapacki Square, Chełmińska to Theatre Square, and Szeroka and Królowej Jadwigi to the New Town Market Square, one can enjoy museums, places of interests such as the monument of Nicolaus Copernicus (depicted in the photo no. 1), tenement houses, city walls, restaurants, pizza houses, bars and pubs, bakeries or cafes, and shops providing variety of goods. Do not forget to listen to the audio file representing our trip.

Let's listen to the city

A city is a heterogeneous and dynamic idea, which can be interpreted as systematic routine practices focused on human behavior in a milieu formed by people. Principally, such milieu is always filled with sounds. Most of the tones are of human origin: the sound space of every city surrounds an individual in the form of tones, human speech, or music providing a kind of specific soundtrack for everyday lives. The sounds and noises recorded in the project were segregated and interpreted as certain aural categories influencing the human sense of hearing, e.g., natural sounds or non-natural noises, that is, tones generated either by people and animals or those produced by machines and objects.

Follow Marek's journey by listening to this soundscape of the city on Soundcloud.

In this project I follow theoretical assumptions on sound studies and urban soundscape, or the city noise. R. Murray Schafer (1973; 1977) perceives soundscape as the acoustic environment organizing the sound experience of people and understood as any fragment of sonic surrounding, which relates to both natural or industrial environment and music composition, that is, sounds organized by humans according to certain patterns. Schefer's concept, published in *Tuning of the World* (1977) and developed in his subsequent papers (e.g., Schefer 2012), was commented and adapted by other scholars in the following decades, and is mirrored also in contemporary research, see: Atkinson (2007), Galloway (2017) García Ruiz and South (2018), Millie (2016). Multiple research in the field indicate that the sonic domain is considered as a significant point of reference, especially in the cities. The latter are characterized by the high volume of sound, labeled negatively as noise, that accompanies the people's activities. Noise itself, no matter of its origin, "is a prime source of orientation to our surroundings, both removal of sound and overload of aural input are disorientating and discomforting" (García Ruiz and South 2018 3), and in cultural sphere of everyday life 'noises are the sounds we have learned to ignore' (Schafer 1973: 29) as undesired sounds interrupting people with their activities, providing annoyances and anxieties, which is reflected in psychological research in the field (Conroy 2000; McCoy 2006; Sacks 2008). Moreover, it the soundscape concept is recognized also in the context of intensive field recording theory and practice, see for instance Flügge (2011), Gallagher (2015), and Marciniak (2011). Field recordings can be defined as "the production, circulation, and playback of audio recordings of the myriad soundings of the world: the sounds of animals, birds, cities, machines, forests, rivers, glaciers, public spaces, electricity, social institutions, architecture, weather – anything and everything that vibrates. Field recordings are made by sound artists and sound designers, researchers, musicians, and hobbyists" (Gallagher, 2015: 560). Moreover, as Elen Flügge implies: we have to listen to sounds in the public sphere and "A sound space is

bound to the individual as a listener and to the state of their auditory surroundings. We are in a complex sonic exchange with our environments, making, muting, altering and auditing sound. The potential conditions and content of what we might be hearing has been undergoing massive changes in recent times: closing in through dense population as well as opening up through virtual means and the availability of private sound devices" (Flügge 2011).

The research methods applied in my project were the ones useful for collecting the acoustic data in the city environment (documentation), categorizing the data (classification), and finally, contextual interpretation of the data (interpretation). Thus, the methods employed in the project were: urban ethnography, content analysis, and critical approach to culture expressed by cultural studies perspective (Barker 2003; Chambers 1986; Farina 2014; Hall 1994; Levack Drever 2002, Storey 1996). They allow for the interpretation of soundscape and the field recording placing it in theoretical context.

The main objective of the study is to examine the idea of soundscape as an urban phenomenon: contemporary people practice their lives in an urban milieu, as human culture is an urban one in the first place. For the purpose of the paper, as the researcher, I took the role of a flâneur wandering via three city routes recording occasional sounds. The recording was done combining two techniques of data collecting, namely, firstly, "go ahead" technique which implies that the persons recording sound go according to the specific route they intended to explore. Secondly, "follow the sound" mode was used, in which the individuals recording sound try to elastically model their walk to collect interesting tones, so they try to some extent to react with environment. In this phase of the project, I treated myself only as a carrier of the recording equipment: during the field recording I walked with headphones on and listened to music in order not to hear the sounds or noises coming from the streets. This procedure was set to limit the interpretative suggestions (signals or sounds) that might be caused by soundscape itself and thus, could bias the second phase of the activity: the reception and interpretation of the recorded data. The walking routes were also documented with a camera, taking photographs and short video clips, to illustrate the paper. All the photographs and videos were taken during the field recording: I held the digital recorder in one hand and operated the camera with the other. All the deficiencies and imperfections of the videos or photos stem from that fact, as the study prioritized the recording of sound.

The activities described above produced a map of Torun's soundscape. The three tracks recorded during the field research (recorded independently and categorized separately) are mixed into one mono piece of the city 'music' hosted on the *Riffs* Soundcloud account.

2. The sound of the city
People and the city

In the recordings done in this project, the sound space is portrayed as dependent on several social determinants with significant consequences for human beings. The places through which the routes led were full either of people or of vehicles driven by people and carrying them. A human is the city subject and object at the same time, which means that people create, define, manage and reproduce the city space on several levels, that can be defined as follows:

⇨ functional sphere: the city servers as a space for people (with shops, houses, squares, services, entertainment, education, transport of people and goods for people);
⇨ behavioural sphere: the city is the area where people constantly stay and they used to behave there in a certain way;
⇨ structural sphere: the city is a place of life, work, education and entertainment for people and these purposes are operated by institutions in which a specific structure of roles, positions and statuses always emerge;
⇨ symbolic sphere: the city is a network of symbols defined by people, read and used by humans for their own purposes;
⇨ material sphere: the city always has a certain physical character, determined by urban architecture (buildings, streets), spaces free of buildings (squares, parks), vehicles, and also people themselves, as the city is a kind of a physical being, usually embedded in a form of specific space, and as a result, the spatial character of cities is expressed through this materiality.

The main sources of sounds registered in the project were:

⇨ people: who practice conversations, speeches, shouts, crying, singing, sighing, or physiological sounds;
⇨ animals: barking of dogs, croaking of crows, crows walking on the leaves, cooing pigeons;
⇨ machines: such as bells, prams, carriages and trolleys, engine vehicles (car and trams), and signals at the traffic lights.

The recordings

The recording process took place in the October of 2018 (12.10; 14.10; and 16.10) during three over thirty minutes sound walks in three directions of the city: the North, the East, and the West, and the recordings were mixed into one sound 31 minutes long file, which is also illustrated by visual content reflecting in the first place the physical space of the city in which the sounds were recorded. It is worth to comment on two questions here: firstly, why these routes were chosen: the East / the North / the West of the Old Town Square? and secondly, why was it the thirty-minute walks? The basic idea that contributed to the design of the routes and planning the whole project was the need to present the diverse character of sounds in urban environment. Walks had to run along various routes and last long enough to leave the Old Town zone, which is characterized almost exclusively by the sounds made by people, and led to the parts of the city in which people's voices are supplemented by the machine sounds, as in these zones both types of noises (natural and mechanical) occur with equal intensity. Thus, the assumption was to achieve the heterogeneous aspects of the audio-sphere, and to represent the heterogeneity of the sound space.

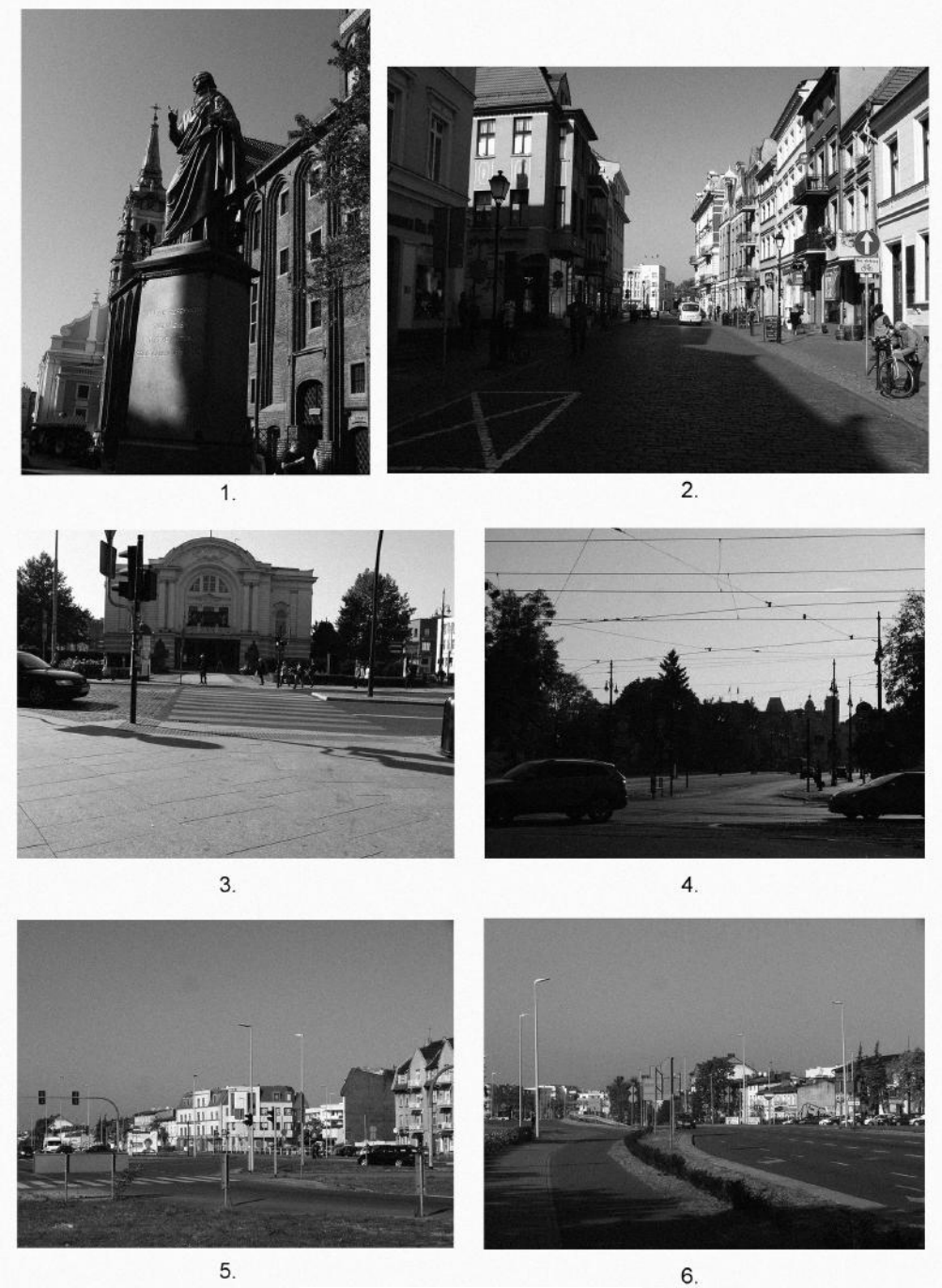
On the recording days the weather was warm and rainless, only during the recordings of the East route the day was windy, which is heard in the second half of the recording, as the wind hiss almost constantly attacks the microphone. The sounds in this sequence of the route were recorded at Warszawska Street (photos 11, 12), which leads directly to the Vistula river, hence, one can almost always experience the natural exposure to the wind blowing from the river with different intensity. Additionally, the space in which I moved during the research was an open one, as the routes did not lead through places or halls covered with roofs physically limiting the space.

The walks

The detailed routes on which the recordings were captured were the following:

Follow these routes on the map available through this QR code

(a) The North: Rynek Starego Miasta (The Old Town Market Square), Chełmińska, Teatralny square, Aleja Solidarności, Szosa Chełmińska (photos: 1–6; videos: 1, 2)



1.

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The North: Video 1 and Video 2

(b) The East: Rynek Starego Miasta, Szeroka, Królowej Jadwigi, Rynek Nowomiejski, Świętej Katarzyny, Warszawska (photos: 7–12; videos: 3, 4[1])

7.

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

The East: Video 3 and Video 4

(c) The West: Rynek Starego Miasta, Różana, Łuk Cezara, Rapacki square, town square (at Mickiewicza street and 500-lecia Torunia Alley), Tujakowskiego, Słowackiego, Moniuszki, Kraszewskiego, Matejki (photos: 13–18; videos: 5, 6, 7[1]).

13.

14.

15.

16.

17.

18.

The West: Video 5, Video 6 and Video 7

The routes (a) and (c) either crossed important communication tracks of the city (streets of Kraszewski, Jan Paweł II Alley, Wały gen. Sikorskiego, St. Catherine square) or led along such tracks (e.g., Szosa Chełmińska and Warszawska streets), that made me to cross the zebras, and only the (b) route led without the necessity to cross any main street, however, it ran up along busy Warszawska street, in which public transport vehicles and cars regularly operate. This fact caused the necessity to stop and wait for the change of the traffic lights or to pass closely next to the traffic signalization. Hence, the numerous examples of the moving or braking cars or trams, and acoustic signals at the crossings (used mainly to help the visually impaired persons) are represented in the files. It turned out in the recordings, that initially the soundscape recorded on all three routes included sounds made by people, and later they passed into the noises generated mainly by the machines (public transport, trams, cars and vans). These tones in general were predictable and typical for the urban environment. There were, however, disruptions in this predictability, namely: traffic lights signalization (repetitive sound of high frequency used for the zebras can be alarming, especially for the people not used to such type of signaling, as this kind of electronic device is not present at all passes in the city) on all routes and the sounds of medical service ambulances passing nearby (this took place on the routes (a) and (c) – in both cases they are present in the final parts of the recordings, but not in the immediate proximity of me recording the sounds). These were the only disturbances in the generally predictable and acoustically 'safe' urban sound space.

Moreover, a variety of the acoustic data was obtained in the recordings. One can learn from the files that there are places 'full' of sounds on the one hand, and on the other, there are spaces in which the sound is indistinct, 'blurred', distant, appearing as a slight noise in the background. Frequently in these cases, the researchers themselves could become the source of such sounds as steps on the pavement, limbs rubbing with clothes, or loud breathing, coughing, sneezing, etc. The researcher's body, in general and in my recordings in particular, was intended to be eliminated as a source of sound, but it was not fully achieved, as the case of the footsteps sounds on rustling leaves at Warszawska treet indicates (as heard in the second part of the East route recordings). However, these sounds were natural elements of the city's soundscape.

The same applies to clothes as the sounds of the outfit are typical for urban space filled with people, and consequently, their presence in recordings should be treated as natural and evident. Thus, some sounds (in fact, only a few are present in the recordings) were generated by me myself and resulted from the fact that I was a part of the studied and recorded environment.

Consequently, I took the role of a flâneur recording the sounds of a specific city, walking on the specifically planned urban routes. I walked slowly, sometimes accelerating the pace or occasionally slowed it down, and from time to time I turned slightly off the road to record the urban sound generated in a particular space. That was the routine that happened during all the recording days. In the case of the East route, I got out of the main street (Królowej Jadwigi) to the New Town Market Square, where the organic products market was temporarily held, hence the recorded conversations between traders and customers partly concern this sort of goods (photo 9). Similarly, in the North route I got off of Szosa Chełmińska street to walk through the city marketplace, and thus, some conversations registered in this place are related to products put up for sale (clothes, toys, food, fruits and vegetables), their quality and prices, etc.

The West walk was relatively different one comparing to the aforementioned routes, as I turned towards the bus stop at Rapacki Square to register buses passing and stopping at the stop (this is an important transport hub of the city) (video 7; photo 14), and it also took place on the other side of the pedestrian crossing next to which a tram line leads. Also there, I turned to the bus stop, registering public transport vehicles and cars starting from under the lights at the pedestrian crossing. This particular place (Rapacki Square) is contrasted with the next part of the recording at the town square at Adam Mickiewicz street and 700-lecia Torunia Alley, where two types of sounds of were recorded, firstly, the one generated by people passing me by (mainly students talking about their current problems at the university) and secondly, the sounds of birds of the hooded crow species (hoodie), which is an omnivorous bird typical of the urban environment in the European lowlands (photo 15). It is also the case of Toruń, as the crow occurs in a variety of sites (parks, squares, housing estates), with the Old Market at the forefront (also the pigeons frequently appear there: this is the most common bird in the center of the city; however, they are not present in the recordings).

From my point of view as the researcher, the most interesting event as regards the recorded sound took place at the square mentioned above: I recorded the sounds of crows as they were walking on the leaves lying on the ground under the trees. So these were not so much the natural sounds of crows generated by their physiological apparatus (referred to as "croaking", but in fact, this noise is characteristic for the bird in flight), but the sounds of birds walking on the ground: leaves were rustling crushed by the claws of crows, making characteristic noises (also heard in recordings from the second day, that is, the East route). However, if one listens to the sound file without being introduced to this context, one can have the impression that human noises were recorded: not necessarily an animal but a child or an adult could walk on the leaves in the park. In this research I was to cope with a specific interpretative framework: converting the visual experience (a real bird under a tree) and rationalizing it within the context of the acoustic signal that was not expected (a bird walking on the ground). People mainly use to assign the sound of walking in the park, especially on the leaves, to humans and dogs walked by people but not to birds. However, these sounds were issued by some crows gathered in this place: there were no dogs or other people walking under the trees in the square.

In general, interesting was the lack of intensive acoustic impact of animal sounds in the recordings. Animals are a natural element of the sound space: for many species the urban area is the habitus where they live or hunt. The acoustic dimension of a city is constituted by the sounds produced not only by human beings, but also by animals as they are intensively involved in the soundscape of every city. Therefore, I could have expected a relatively large representation of animals in the recordings, as there are several examples of the city animals living at day, such as wild creatures (several species of birds) or the ones controlled by humans (dogs, cats, caged birds). The recordings were made only during the daytime (in the period of high activity of people), which excluded the urban animals active at night (as small rodents, e.g., rats or mice). Surprisingly, only the birds, that is, crows (the West route) and dogs (the East walk) were recorded, however, they were not numerous, even though the routes I went on led constantly near the human headquarters, which for animals means the permanent and easy availability of food and shelter.

3. Did you listen?

All routes ran along the city's important transport tracks or directly crossed them: from the center to the peripheral districts of Toruń (Rubinkowo and Przedmieście Jakubskie districts in the East, Wrzosy and Chełmińskie Przedmieście districts to the North, and Przedmieście Bydgoskie and Bielany districts to the West, and going further in the direction of Bydgoszcz city), in which a large number of the residents dwell. Hence, it was not a surprise that all the recordings vastly reflected the communicative domain of life in Toruń: the sounds of industrial, individual and public transport cover large part of the tones recorded in the project. In the analysed files, the vehicles are constantly making loud noises of diversified intensity: the drivers stop, move, turn the machines, and all the movements are accompanied by gradual or abrupt changes in the engine's operation, the squeaking sounds of brakes, warning bells and high-pitched clatter of the wheels on the tram tracks, etc. These sounds cover the high and low frequency spectra, but the ear of an individual living in the city is generally accustomed to them so much that they do not constitute a sphere of significant discomfort while people move around the urban space.

As an independent underground musician, I always deal with sounds, namely, with instruments and electronic devices on the one hand, and on the other with sounds and noises coming from the environment that I used to record to employ them as the illustrative background for music. In my compositions for Tacuara Nod band, L2&T duo, or s.n.igurath solo project, I used the sound tapes intensively. In these experimental dark noise industrial electronic music the sonic illustrations were significant part of many compositions. Accordingly, I included children's voices, people's conversations, barking dogs, blowing in the wind, vacuum cleaner noises, TV/radio news, dialogs from the films, doors scratching, forks and spoons sounds, or the city street noises, etc. in the structure of music pieces. In the extreme cases, I built the whole compositions around such pre-recorded tones, as it was in the case of twenty-seven minute Tacuara Nod's track "The Journey" ("Podróż"): music played by the musicians run along the tape of the Warsaw underground (the Metro) journey recordings, and the subsequent train-stops heard as the announcements on a train forced us to change the mood of improvised music.

While recording the street sounds for the bands I played in, I taped the tones not to listen to them as a means in themselves (as – to say – certain compositions), but they were collected with the primary purpose to be used as the background illustrations that enriched music. The composition as such was the final goal that dominated the whole creative process. Consequently, instrumentations, arrangements, sound proceedings, and of course, the soundscape backgrounds – all served the main idea of music composition.

In the present project the sound space recordings were collected to be listened to as the sounds of the city in the first place, and were not supposed to be used in any different project as a sort of background illustrating tones or a sort of specific music. Thus, the recordings of the city walking are the soundscape compositions themselves, that is, they are interpreted as such. I stress this, because during the recordings I started to listen to the city sound space in a different manner than during the recordings I done for the bands. While working as a musician and composer for experimental dark electronic group Tacuara Nod or electronic s.n.igurath project, I was concentrated on the illustrative aspect of a particular project, namely, in my mind I had the plan for the whole composition in which music and the background soundscape were intended as a joint entity. Taking the field recordings for the *Riffs* journal paper, I concentrated on the sound domain in the first place. In a sense, the city started to "talk" to me primarily by the audio channel. Hence, I started to pay the attention for the elements and details related to the recording process itself and to decode all the physical stimuli by the sense of hearing: a visual sign or symbol had to be interpreted as a result of sound signals that surrounded me. People, cars, trams, and machines were heard in the first place and seen only then. These sphere became of primary significance, and the visual aspects of mine city walking were entirely subjugated to aural domain.

Consequently, in the paper I presented the "field recording" strategy to catch the personal sound space, rather than "a musician recording in the field" approach that I used to employ in the previous works.

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His main hobby is music: he plays in the experimental/industrial/ improvised music band Tacuara Nod, and in dark-elektro-cyber punk project Der Birken.

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