GERMANY IN THE LOUD TWENTIETH CENTURY

An Introduction

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CHAPTER 6
Berlin Sounds
Audible Cartography of a Formerly Divided City

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Sometimes silence can be enriching. While talking, it is difficult to concentrate on smells, touches, and sounds. Being silent is the precondition for being open to the variety of sensations that a human being can absorb. This chapter is informed by radio journalism, in that it deals with sound memories and the absence of speech, while at the same time relying on the instrument of language to express the tension between speech and ambient sound. This tension, typical for any radio interview, demonstrates how enriching sound can be to a story and how powerfully its absence can be felt; as thematized in the introduction of this book, it is difficult to put sound into words, yet articulating remembered sounds provides a better understanding and a more vivid memory of the past. The interviews in this chapter speak to the importance of using sounds to remember and to the meaning(s) of silence.

SENSUAL GEOGRAPHY

With regard to urban space, one often forgets that the city is not only perceived visually but invites its inhabitants on a sensual journey. Rolf Lindner, professor of European Cultural Anthropology at the Humboldt University Berlin, conducted a visual, acoustic, tactile, and olfactory study of three selected streets in that city (Ackerstraße, Adalbert-Straße, and Karl-Marx-Straße) from April 2006 until September 2007 and presented the research findings in three parallel exhibitions at the Museum Mitte am Festungsgraben, the Kreuzberg Museum, and the Gallerie Saalbau in Neukölln. On his accompanying Web site Sensing the street. Eine Straße in Berlin, Lindner wrote: "A street in Berlin: the chirping of birds and the roaring of exhaust pipes, graffiti-colorful and concrete-grey, head scarf and leather jacket, East and West next to each other: the Adalbertstraße [in Berlin-Kreuzberg] is a landscape of sensual oppositions."
This chapter focuses on the role of sound in acoustically reliving Berlin between 1961 and 1989. An investigation into the city's soundscapes reveals new layers of experiencing the urban context and leads to a deeper understanding of the city. In order to hear these sounds, one has to listen carefully. Yet the nature of listening is a complicated and complex one, as Barry Truax points out in his book *Acoustic Communication*:

We should recall that whereas hearing can be regarded as a somewhat passive ability that seems to work with or without conscious effort, listening implies an active role involving differing levels of attention—“listening for,” not just “listening to.” ... A general characteristic of cognitive processing that seems to lie at the basis of listening is the detection of difference. Sound is predicated on change at every level. ... Therefore, we may characterize the first stage of cognitive processing as the detection of change. Detail is important, but only when it presents new information.¹

Sound, sound environments, or soundscapes in this chapter do not refer to noise, oral history, or music. Instead, the focus is on ambient sounds and specific sources of signals. An ambient sound is an acoustic summary of whatever encloses the listener, though it does so unintentionally.⁴ Listeners are touched by something that is not embedded in chords and tunes like music and is not encoded linguistically like language.⁵ The main difference between music and ambient sound lies in the individual's choice of what kind of music to listen to, as opposed to the lack of agency one has in being exposed to the noises around oneself. It is these sounds, seemingly insignificant to the listener, which nonetheless affect one, regardless of one's decision, choice, taste, or will.

The term “ambient sound” (or “soundscaping”) addresses what producers of radio documentaries, such as the author of this chapter, refer to as an “acoustic atmosphere.” While it can easily cause problems during an audio production and in the process of editing, it is also painfully missed when it is not there. For example, while recording the soundscapes of Mumbai, Lisbon, and Detroit in order to create a mimetic city portrait for the radio, one should not try to artificially create these ambiances. Every city has its own characteristic “city sound” like it has its own architecture, its own pace, and its own social dynamics.

Yet many choose to alienate themselves from the sounds of their city. In his critique of urban human behavior, composer and theorist John Cage observed:

Many people in our society now go around the streets and in the buses and so forth playing radios with earphones on and they don’t hear the world around them. They hear only what they have chosen to hear. I can’t understand why they cut themselves off from that rich experience which is free. I think this is the beginning of music.⁶

Music means “composing” audible elements whereas ambient sounds position themselves arbitrarily in space. What Cage considered the beginning of music is the aforementioned phenomenon of audible presence. Usually these sounds are filtered out as annoying and interfering. Since they have no obvious purpose or, arguably, relevant information they are disregarded as bothersome occurrences, useless for communication or—even worse—as harmful particles of acoustic pollution. These phenomena are—contrary to Cage’s rehabilitation of them as musical components—still considered to be the opposite of music.⁷

Furthermore the appearance of ambient sound is beyond the control of the listener. The English language is able to express this often unsolicited intrusion with the dual meaning of the term “volume,” sound occupies a certain space and acoustic intensity when perceived. In particular, ambient sound radiates unasked, bounces back intangibly with sources often tricky to localize. In short, these sounds are ephemeral and present at the same time; they are neither fictitious nor intentionally made by an author or composer and very rarely created according to a plan or set of rules. This kind of audible emergence is best described as an unintentional encounter that questions both the positioning of the self (the listener) as well as the other (the source). Ambient soundscapes are hard to decipher due to the fact that their elements are hard to separate. The ear filters out what it already knows and tries to find order in chaos: when one thinks of a cobblestone street with people, cars, radios, and dogs, the loudest source—probably the old car with its rusty exhaust pipe—will get the most attention, but it will mix with the barking of the dog and the sounds of high heels stepping on the cobblestones. In other words, it is hard to completely separate one source from the other, even more so if they are unknown sources. Thus, the conscious perception of these ambient sounds depends on the listener's position in space, on the closeness to the source, and on the meaning of the sounds for the listener in terms of danger or irritation or other information.⁸

Professional radio journalists are used to handling sounds differently, simply because radio enables the sounds to speak for themselves. Any kind of sound is respected, as all sounds add layers of meaning to what one produces for radio. In radio, sound is even more crucial than in television because there is no visual backup. Just imagine hearing a voice that tells a story: how much more effective is it when there is the “right” sound in the background? With the “right” sound, radio journalists can alter the meaning of what this person is saying, they can manipulate the level of attention, they can frame certain utterances acoustically and, by doing so, create multiple layers of perception and meaning. These impressions emotionally and directly affect the listeners.⁹ Knowing this from my work in the studio, I wanted to explore how the ambient sounds of the everyday influence one’s life. This chapter, then, leaves the studio and ventures out into the streets of Berlin, seeking to explore the power of auditory socialization. It asks, how can seemingly meaningless background noise become extremely meaningful in a city in which space is heavily politicized? And what role does sound play with respect to memory?

This chapter presents research findings of how aural sensations are linked to feelings of longing and belonging in an urban context.⁶ Berlin seemed to be an ideal playground to learn about parameters of auditory socialization: two urban entities between 1961 and 1989, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the East and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the West, were geographically close yet ideologically far away. Consequently, they produced different typical city sounds following the rules of industrial design, media taste, technological development, and local accents. In regard to Berlin before, during, and after 1989, the following questions were of interest: What did the East and the West sound like? Which sounds are still recognized and identified with specific places? Which of them have been lost and are sorely missed? Can one still hear the difference between East and West today? For this research, historians, sound artists, anthropologists, and scholars of literature and theater were consulted, as well as the inhabitants of both the former East and West of Berlin. I recorded the interviews and collected sound samples from the Deutsche
Rundfunkarchiv Potsdam-Babelsberg (the German radio and television broadcast archive), a historic catalog of atmospheric or ambient sounds, as basic material for various radio documentaries that were then produced for Austrian Public Radio (ORF, Ö1).

FOUNTAINS: EAST GERMAN SOUNDMARKS IN THE CITY

Interviewees from the former East Berlin often stated that the sounds they missed from their neighborhoods the most were those of fountains. Before 1989, fountains were fundamental icons for meeting places in public parks and squares, and many of them were erected in East Berlin as prestigious signs of the regime. In the decade after 1989, most of them were shut down or deconstructed due to the city’s financial collapse and privatization of water supplies. The East Berliners interviewed for this project reacted very emotionally to the sound of those fountains’ water; a sound that made them calm and provided the soundtrack for social exchange. They emphasized its contemplative quality in the middle of the urban rush.12 The concrete fountains had become metaphors for the antagonism of natural harmony and artificial, technical environments. They were also remembered as a public luxury. Fountains in West Berlin were neither so numerous nor so popular and therefore not missed. Nor were they associated with a specific place; in other words, they were not localized.

In the last few years, some of the fountains in the Eastern parts of the city were reopened, not with public funding but instead by private initiatives, recognizing that spaces with fountains are recreation areas within the city. I visited one of them close to Jannowitzbrücke in Berlin Mitte. In the noisy desert of Plattenbauten (industrial apartment blocks) and heavy traffic, a group of people were hanging out at a tiny fountain, not bigger than a bath tub, easy to miss. Because the district around Jannowitzbrücke is a heavily trafficked area, they had to stand close together to hear one another’s words. All of them, I soon found out, lived in the nearby Plattenbauten and were frequent visitors of the pub (also called Jannowitzbrücke) situated right in front of the fountain. Some were retired, some held jobs, while others indicated they were between jobs. What they all shared was their common past in the GDR and the fact that they identified with and were proud of this site, because they associated it with their former country.

Pub owner Barbara Lauenburg stated:

Well, water is pleasant, a joy like flowers, you know, Berliners love the water. That’s why we have so many fountains in Berlin. I mean, did you know Berlin has more bridges than Venice? Water is for people from Berlin-Brandenburg what the mountains are for Austrians or Swiss, it has the same effect. You sit down in between the houses, you listen to the fusing and spluttering, you see the light reflecting and mirrored in the water, after some time you calm down, the sound of the water becomes louder, begins to dominate your senses. It creates an atmosphere, it means relaxing in a sea of concrete. . . .

I remember meeting at Strausberger Platz [in Berlin-Lichtenberg, N.D.] or at the Neptunbrunnen at Alexanderplatz, close to the TV tower. It was a spectacle, an attraction: the fountains would rise up five or six meters high, the cascades would flow. That was impressive, a meeting point for everybody. Or the Märchenbrunnen close to Königstor at Friedrichshain. It contained sculptured figures, all from fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, very appealing for children. People loved those sites. The children gathered, they played here, it was peaceful . . .

I am an old East Berliner, living in East Berlin since 1976, and I can tell, coming from the countryside: fountains compensate for the lack of nature in a city. Once they are torn down, something is missing. Living in a city means stress and lots of angry people. Sitting in front of a fountain makes people relax, I forget about how much shit happens in the lives of most of us. And I forget about the ugliness of my surroundings, because my ears take over . . .

In GDR times, water didn’t play a role. We had enough of it, and it was a source that belonged to everyone. It was part of local culture. You cannot separate water, you cannot own it, so you cannot privatize it. That’s what I think, but the city agents think differently; they have sold what cannot be sold. It was ours. It is ours. And I miss the water games, the fresh and cool air surrounding the water, the noise it made when you approached it, it is a sound that is loud and pure at the same time, it is the sound of infinity. You know, West Berliners cannot appreciate these “modest” sources of public pleasure, because they lack the experience of social warmth and solidarity. That’s what they envied us for but would never admit. And now they want to teach us that nothing is for free, anything must be paid for . . .

Fountains are a part of Berlin, they belong here like the tram or the river Spree. When they are shut down, they are a disgraceful image. A fountain is there to work, let the water run. As long as our fountain didn’t run—that was for fifteen years, shut down shortly after eighty-nine—it was used as a trash bin. The area became noticeably dilapidated. That was frustrating. For seven years now, I have been active in the fountain initiative, mobilizing the neighborhood, raising money, inspiring sponsors like a nearby brewery, the Berlin water supply, an insurance company, as well as an advertising company which declared itself as the Berlin fountain sponsor in return for advertising space. I learned that a fountain like our Pfauenbrunnen is good for business. It prettifies and stimulates.13

Lauenburg and the other anonymous East Berliners described the sound of the fountain as “peaceful” and did not seem to pay attention at all to the ongoing traffic jams—quite contrary to my own perception of this high-traffic area with the roaring of engines, shutting of car doors, and honking of horns. Instead, their ears “took over.” It is interesting to note that, with the exception of the “ugliness of the surroundings,” none of them mentioned specific negative sounds associated with the GDR. On the contrary, their ears harbored memories of the pleasure of sitting around a fountain in a public place, making them nostalgic about the agreeable sounds they were familiar with and rejecting the memories of sounds that were not so positive or meaningful.14

Today, by claiming the fountain’s sounds as something specifically East German, they claim the entire unified space around the fountain to be East German—a sound and therefore a space the West Berliners would not appreciate or even understand. The shutting down of the fountains and the accompanying lack of their sound was, for them, yet another example of how the West took over the East. Most fountains were not disassembled, but, by shutting off the water, the city water supply stripped the fountains of their function. They were transformed from a nurturing place of relaxation for adults and children into abstract sculptures, seemingly useless. The fountain could not work as a visual landmark as its sounds made it into a soundmark. Sound created and triggered memory and led to a combined perception
of acoustic and physical sensations: by reminiscing about the sounds of her “safe haven,” the fountain, Lauenburg also recalled “fresh and cool air surrounding the water.” The shutting down of the water, from the perspective of the interviewee, was equal to taking away their meeting space altogether, or to stripping them of their past. They associated water with community life, and its sound was equated with relaxation, the coming together of families, and the warmth of community during GDR times.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification, many distinct acoustic features like the fountains have vanished, unless they were preserved for historical or archival reasons. Sounds that were supposedly typical for East Berlin before 1989, such as the jingles of Radio Moskow or RIAS, megaphones and parades in public spaces, cobblestone streets, tramways, or the wide streets with specific echoes, were all mentioned as features of sound distinction in the divided city. The tiny reopened fountain behind the Jannowitzbrücke seemed to be one of the few aural souvenirs kept from the GDR available to everyday people (i.e., those without access to sound archives)—in other words, a constant reminder of the happy times of the past.

SOUNDS OF TRAFFIC: NAME THAT CAR!

After witnessing how people had claimed the sounds of fountains as something specifically East German, I sorted through the German radio and television broadcast archive, listening to many hours of street sounds, sirens, public announcements, parades, media jingles, technical devices such as toasters or tape recorders, and many other sounds to develop an aural survey for my interviewees. A series of tests was designed to find out what other sounds Ossis (East Germans) and Wessis (West Germans) would recognize as distinctively “theirs.” Would people claim sounds depending on their auditory socialization? Would Ossis and Wessis separate themselves based on their acoustic memory? After being confronted with various sound bits, both groups were asked to identify sounds: GDR sirens, copy machines, home appliances, factory sounds in the neighborhood, doorbells, ringing telephones, and the like. The sound of traffic—car horns, car doors, and the sound of engines—seemed particularly interesting after interviewing Dirk Jacob, who had grown up in the West and who was responsible for the sound design in German films like Good-bye, Lenin! (2003), Knallhart (2006), and Requiem (2006). Jacob was convinced that traffic sounds are the most important acoustic ingredient to make a film historically “authentic” and credible. Such sounds, he stated, he would never “fake” digitally; rather, he reconstructed them by using archival material or reactivating original vehicles, like recording real trucks such as the Robur 80 on the set. “You should not pay attention to the sound, the sound should have an effect by itself,” he said. “Sound acts subliminally. You realize the difference when you watch a film and turn it off. So is the difference between East and West, too: a noticeable—however subliminal—fact.”

The interviews started off with cars, since only a few car brands like Trabant, Wartburg, and Skoda S100 were available in the GDR; in light of this limited availability, it seemed that all interviewees would be familiar with the sounds. I met with two men and one woman from the former East: a lawyer, an archive employee, and a teacher. They listened to a few of the sound samples from the archive and were then asked to identify the sounds produced by car doors, motorbikes, and car engines. Here are two responses:

This is a motorbike MZ, a two-cycle engine, a typical GDR motorbike, no doubt, whether from the seventies or eighties. Well, and there, the banging of doors, maybe a Wartburg, the muffled sound is definitely not a Trabi, that I know, you feel that in your stomach, you know . . .

I couldn’t tell, I have heard that sound before but I couldn’t name it. Oh, that is outing me as a Wessi! Now somebody said “Kerstin,” and the way she said that is clearly Eastern. This exact German, the tonality, you cannot miss that, neither as a Wessi nor as an Ossi, but from the sound of the cars alone, I cannot tell.

Many people from the East were able to easily distinguish among different car brands. They also showed an obvious pride in these car sounds. In comparison, people who grew up in the West were not able to identify the various car doors except for the Trabi—a car often cited in Western media as synonymous with the Eastern bloc. They were not familiar with any of the other car brands’ sounds. “Oh, that isouting me as a Wessi” was a typical phrase heard in this game of search, recognition, and error—a game well suited to assess what is acoustically familiar and therefore part of local identity and sovereignty.

In both of the following examples, sounds associated with traffic actively triggered East Berliners’ childhood memories:

Or in this song from the radio in the background ["Blau Fahnen nach Berlin"], I wonder if it is from the fifties or from the "Deutschlandtreffen 64" . . . ah, now they are singing "nach Deutschland wehen." That must be from the fifties then, an FDJ [Freie Deutsche Jugend, N.D.] song, when the term "Deutschland" was still used; later that changed. 1964 Deutschlandtreffen, I was nine years old at that time, but for my elder siblings that was a huge event . . . well, radio sounds at the gas station, the words make it easier to identify the car park [laughs] . . .

There are a few traffic sounds, I remember, that have vanished completely, yes indeed. For example a street where nothing happens except a Trabi chugging around the corner. This hardly exists anymore. Oh, there are no more Skoda S100s. When you were riding this Skoda S100, at a speed of exactly eighty kilometers per hour, it produced a roaring that would absorb all other frequencies, so you would be almost deaf. When I was a child, I enjoyed that so much, I would incite my mother: "Stay on eighty, stay there," and then came this strange roaring, where no voice could persist, as the basic frequencies of your voice were sucked, and you yourself were almost vibrating.

This investigation of the connection between sound and memory showed that the memories triggered even caused the interviewees to relive the physical sensations of that time. Again, all memories were positive—none of the interviewees remembered the adrenaline rush when suddenly hearing sirens of ambulances or the impatient honking of horns in traffic. In addition, none of the car sounds were perceived as isolated objects, but rather seen in the context of the entire soundscape, along with radio sounds and a human voice. As in the case of the
fountains, the selectiveness of human memory should be examined: which sounds are still remembered today, and more interesting, which ones are not?

AT THE BORDER: SOUND INSULATIONS AGAINST THE WEST

Learning about the sounds of and within a privatized space such as a car led to exploring the sounds of public transportation, as many more people in both East and West Berlin used the city's transit system on a daily basis. What were the soundscapes on the tram and in the stations? Was there something specifically East or West German about these sounds? Before 1989, the train station Berlin-Friedrichstraße in Berlin-Mitte (see Figure 6.1), a giant transfer station for trains above and under ground and covered by an impressive roof made of glass and steel, was situated on GDR territory. All other stations on the Western lines that ran through East Berlin territory were sealed off. These "ghost stations" through which trains passed without stopping were nevertheless heavily guarded. Berlin-Friedrichstraße, however, served as a transfer point for West Berlin municipal railways and the subway (line U6). When a West Berlin passenger got out at Friedrichstraße station, he or she could transfer from one platform to another but was not allowed to leave the station (and enter the GDR) without the appropriate papers.

Figure 6.1
Train Station Berlin-Friedrichstraße.
Photograph by Nicole Dietrich, 2010.

Annette Scharnberg, who lived and worked as a psychoanalyst in West Berlin before the fall of the Berlin Wall, commuted from her apartment in West Berlin through East Berlin to her workplace in West Berlin. As the train passed through the East, she recalled:

On my way to [Berlin]-Wedding, I went through the East and I remember that everything there sounded a bit different. The underground itself sounded different, too. Instead of going fast and stopping periodically, it went really slowly through the guarded ghost stations. There was a specific sound to this slowness, somehow hollow, maybe because they were emptier. This hollow clack, clack, clack. A different resonance cavity. I think it is like in some films . . . steps approaching you across a big dark room: clack, clack, clack. This hollow sound—I think that stands for something threatening. A hollow sound in the emptiness. And it was emphasized by this light, too, a bluish kind of light. Sound and light together created a very special experience that was a bit threatening but also interesting. It stirred your curiosity.29

Again, remembering sound does not happen through the sonic channel only—remembering the space in the interview, Scharnberg could sense more than acoustics; she remembered the specific light inside the station. All these sensual perceptions combined to loom as something larger, something uncanny, eerie, and unknown. She also mentions that these sounds were both threatening and interesting. Though there surely were other passengers, Scharnberg's sonic memories do not include human voices. By contrast, Claudia Armenious, a teacher from West Berlin, remembered East Berlin guards: "I will always remember the border guards asking you: 'Any weapons, ammunition, kids?' in this fierce tone you only knew from these guards."30

The section of the station open to West Berliners was sealed off from the terminal serving East Berlin trains. Only a few meters apart from each other—in contrast to the zone around the Wall—people from West and East changed trains, daily routines would rub against each other, and the material and corporeal proximity of divergent ideologies would intensify: the passengers from East and West could not see each other, neither their bodies and faces nor their movements, but they could hear each other. Exiting the confined space of the train and entering the space of Friedrichstraße station, one could encounter sounds from the other platforms, separated by walls. One of my interviewees, a woman from the former East, recalled that she could hear announcements like "long distance train to Munich, platform . . . please board now . . . please step back . . . the train to Hamburg is delayed five minutes." This was found to be horrifying. Cities existing on a map of West Germany, out of reach for East Berliners, were constantly announced. An East German could neither travel to Munich and Hamburg, nor participate in any of the other activities of the people on the other platforms; the only common experiences they shared were through sound: traveling air waves that intermingled and passed through the thin walls. Around 1984,31 these paroles of desire, as I call them, were shut down. GDR authorities erected noise barriers in the form of huge walls of steel, blocking the sounds so the announcements and other sounds could not travel across anymore. The wall was then coated with a special antisound surface to correct the absurdity of the situation.32 Two worlds with one sound became two worlds with two distinctive soundscapes that would no longer be shared.
space of silence… The Wall consisted of a huge area, whole blocks had been torn down, you couldn't directly get to it and you also saw very little of it. But there was a strange immobility and silence. Two guards were going up and down on foot or in a little car. They had these Trabi cars painted in green. But now that I try to remember, it was a threatening silence, an unnatural silence.33

Annette Schramberg had described the silence at the Western side of the ghost train station Friedrichstraße as something uncanny, and here the silence perceived from the Eastern side of the Wall, the "strange immobility and silence," was also an eerie experience. The soundscapes were nothing unnatural, yet the interviewee could not put into words what she actually objected to.

Another historian, West German Andreas Ludwig, director of Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR (Center for the Documentation of Everyday Culture in the GDR) in Eisenhüttenstadt, tried to explain the silence:

It was quite spooky. You got there from the center of Berlin and you found yourself in this wasteland. There weren't many buildings, the tram tracks ended in the middle of nowhere, the streets all had cobblestones. At the Potsdamer Platz you could only see the streets that were directed at it, but not the square itself. The Wall was spray-painted all over. And then these bike routes had developed along the Wall: if you wanted to go from Kreuzberg to Wedding you would follow the Wall—there it was completely safe to cycle because there were no cars. And on the other side, it was also quiet, because there was the death strip before East Berlin started. So you couldn't hear East Berlin. And West Berlin you also didn't hear because of the lack of traffic. I always have the impression of complete silence at this Wall. You could hear squeaking bike brakes and pigeons, but mostly there was silence.34

Though Ludwig had rational explanations for the silence, he too found it spooky. There were visual cues for life on the other side of the Wall, but all streets and tracks were interrupted by it. Only a few meters above the Wall, one would imagine, would there be the common airspace heralded by sounds. Yet, again, most interviewees specifically remembered silence.

People who lived directly where the Wall separated East and West had different opinions, though. "People lived there," Walter Obermanns, an archive employee from East Berlin claimed, offended:

Silence? I wouldn't say so. You could sometimes wave to each other through your windows, so I wouldn't say it was an area of silence. In many ways, the two parts of the city were far apart from each other, but right by the Wall, on both sides, there was life. People lived there. It was actually a short distance between the two systems.35

Silence, the absence of sound, is taken here as the absence of life—a notion that the inhabitants of the border area vehemently rejected. Interestingly, Obermanns did not mention any sound but referred back to the visual: waving to people.
Claudia Armenious, who lived on the Western side of the Wall, was a bit more specific:

There were two worlds with this huge wall in between. And there was no contact to the East Berliners in everyday life. A memory as a West Berliner is riding your bicycle along this wall. You have the greatest bike path there, all quiet, no traffic, you cannot get lost, because you always have a means of orientation—it's almost embarrassing! But that's how it was. And, depending on where you were, you would have some Turkish tunes, like in Kreuzberg. You could hear kids playing. Life did exist at the Wall, but in a reduced form, since there was nothing directly on the other side. It was pleasant.36

Armenious perceived silence as nothing threatening or uncanny, but as an agreeable state of mind. The Wall almost seemed like a blank canvas in front of which one was spared from the stimuli of the big city, an oasis with only a few quiet sounds to relax to and recharge. She also mentioned that she could use silence to acoustically orient herself; depending on where the sounds decreased, she would know her geographical position.

Yet the Western area around the Wall was not always an idyllic haven for bikers and playing children only. Rock for Berlin, a concert in West Berlin in June 1987, featuring David Bowie among others, was a rare moment of shared acoustic experience. Masses of people from East Berlin gathered at the boulevard Unter den Linden close to the concert on the other side. Uwe Bräuner, a lawyer from East Berlin recollected:

A big stage was put up on the Western side of the Reichstag. The interesting thing was that you could only hear. You couldn't see anything. The distance between the barrier in the East and the stage was at least one thousand meters. And then there was this one spot in front of the Soviet embassy where the sound could be caught especially well. Certainly, you could have heard it much better on the radio, but it was a sort of collective experience... That was quite a ticklish situation for the East German authorities. At the Wall, there were a couple of thousand teenagers. What could the police have done if they had run wild and had started running towards the Wall? So they had widely blocked everything and then something happened that nobody had expected: the teenagers began to shout: "The Wall needs to go!"37

This the people in West Berlin could hear as well. Listening to the event on the radio would not have been the same as being there, as listening became synonymous for encouragement. The East Berliners were at all times aware of the West—they gathered to hear the sound waves traveling from West to East Berlin. They were facing the Wall, trying to imagine what was behind it, although they could only participate acoustically. The West Berliners, on the other hand, had gathered to see and hear the concert and had probably forgotten what was behind the stage and behind the Wall. When the East Berliners began to shout—their acoustic protest of the system—and were heard, they placed themselves back on the map. East Berlin existed behind the Wall—although none of the concertgoers and musicians could see it at this point in time, they could certainly hear it. Becoming aware of this, David Bowie asked for the speakers to be turned not to face the concertgoers, but to face the Wall. Now both Berlins participated in the concert, and the Western media broadcast it into all households.

A project of sound cartography transforms the notion of the city space into something fluid. Like water, sounds and memories are soaked up, limits and borders cancelled—sound creates unity out of difference. By examining four urban landmarks, fountains, traffic sounds, a train station, and the Berlin Wall, it has become clear how the sounds associated with them define their geographical space, their political and social role, their utopian or dystopian character. Together with the other senses, these sounds create and trigger memory and lead to a feeling of belonging. Whereas the main concentration was on ambient sound in all other examples, the East Berliners’ reaction to Rock for Berlin showed that sounds can overcome political and geographical barriers and that everyone who has a voice (literally and figuratively) has the ability to change history. Only two years after the concert, the masses shouting “Wir sind ein Volk!” (“We are one people!”) had a sustained and group-constituting effect on their listeners; it was the power of these chants that led to the fall of the Wall and transformed the country.

With the unification of Germany, the GDR only exists in memories. The Wall has been deconstructed, and, although the renovated train station Friedrichstraße continues to be one of the main transfer stations in Berlin, it does not reveal its special past to the thousands of people rushing through each day. Soon the last Trabis will drive on the streets, and the fight for the public fountains might fall victim to budget cuts. The study of sound is paramount in the experience of the city, yet any kind of sound phenomenon—be it music, voice, or entire soundscapes—is closely linked to vanishing: the moment it is heard, it is already gone. Sonic testimonies are important. As with every sensual experience, sound phenomena represent experience, memory, and therefore history. They shape the notion of the city and its inhabitants: they represent the evasive part of history in their fluid as well as penetrating character.

NOTES

1. The research was conducted with Alex Arteaga from UNIL/UDK Studio für Klangkunst and Klangforschung, Wolfgang Knapp from the Universität der Künste Berlin, and students of anthropology and the arts. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.
4. While this may often also hold true for noise, noise can be created intentionally. In its popular definition, noise is "unwanted sound" and carries the connotation of annoyance, disturbance; it provokes uneasiness. Noise is defined as such by the listener and the context. Ambient sound, on the other hand, must not necessarily annoy its listeners; on the contrary, it can be used as a tool to understand the city, as shown in this chapter.
7. For details on John Cage, see Brett Van Hoesen and Jean Paul-Perrot's chapter in this book.
8. Compare to “Volumen” and “Lautstärke” in German.
The Politics of Sound

Walls with Ears

Just as seeing and viewing, hearing and listening can be actions influenced—or restrained—by (political) power structures. In his article “Open Ears,” R. Murray Schafer notes that the Latin audire (to hear) forms the core of the English word obey (as its Latin root obaudire literally translates as “hearing from below”). Similarly, the German words hören und gehorchen (hear and obey) are also linguistically connected. The chapters in Section III discussed how identity formation is connected to sound perception or memories of sounds in both Hilbig’s novel Das Provisorium and in Dietrich’s ear-witness reports. The chapters in Section IV examine ways in which producing and consuming sound were inextricably linked to East German politics during the Cold War era. Historically, East Germans went from acoustic irradiation by the Nazis to acoustic control and surveillance by the Stasi. This acoustic manipulation, as both articles show, took place on multiple levels.

David Tompkins’s chapter examines sound as a means of political control by investigating GDR musical culture from the immediate postwar years to the late 1950s. He concentrates on music festivals in both cities and rural areas, because the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) saw festivals as a particularly effective means of propagating their ideas and values among the wider population. Tompkins studies festival advertising, official policies, and the music performed at these festivals to find out who participated in creating the socialist soundscape: in other words, did the sound of socialism come from above or was it a collective sound created from below? He also ultimately asks the question: what did socialist music sound like?

Christiane Lenk considers not which sounds were produced, but which sounds were heard in the GDR, because, as Bull and Back point out: “The history of surveillance is as much a sound history as it is a history of vision.” In her chapter, she points out the different functions of sound within the system of acoustic surveillance by the Stasi, as represented in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s award-winning film The Lives of Others (2006). Lenk views the writer Dreyman’s wiretapped apartment as the sound equivalent of Bentham’s...