

The Politics of Aural Space Madrid City Council's Noise Brigades

José Luis Espejo

"We are not going to let up on noise, because we think a quieter city is possible"

Ana Botella

(Executive Member for the Environment, Madrid City Council)

"Silence is the ultimate weapon of power"

Charles De Gaulle

(18th President of the French Republic)

"**E**verything was absolutely ideal on the day I bombed the Pentagon. The sky was blue. The birds were singing," said Bill Ayers. "I wasn't a terrorist [...] I just wanted to propagate the piercing sound of disobedience."¹ When art was recognised as part of life, making noise had to become a way of engaging in politics. Consequently, noise in art could only be an element of subversion, and noise itself an

absolute dissonance, a metaphorical opposition to virtually every known form of social organisation. Noise could be seen as a counter-power strategy, but if we were to create a new political model it was not enough to simply learn how to make noise – we had to learn how to listen to it.²

This text does not advocate noise as a political expression – although I would have absolutely no objection to that – but aims to contribute to the

1. Quoted in S. Rocha, *Los Días de Furia. Contracultura y Lucha Armada en los Estados Unidos* (Tenerife: La Felguera, 2005).

2. Plato talked about an art of listening, to which Foucault replies: "How could it be a *tekhne*, if you bear in mind that that means a form of knowledge, knowledge that can only be acquired through listening? Therefore, what we might call 'an art of listening' cannot be an art in the strictest sense. It is experience, it is competence, it is skill, it is a specific way of getting to know the demands of listening. *Empeiria* and *tribe* – not yet a *tekhne* – for speaking, but there is none for listening." M. Foucault, *Lectures at the Collège de France* (1982), tr. G. Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

emergence of listening policies by analysing specific concepts and their relationship with the ideologies that generated them. It proposes a way of thinking about silence and noise in connection with space and the powers that govern these relationships. There are numerous issues that I could analyse in this reflection on listening modes: the entertainment and propaganda media, surveillance methods, the use of sound as a weapon and how individuals are conditioned through musical language. However, for the sake of familiarity, I will begin with something local as an example of the creation of political meaning based on the concepts of noise and silence and their repercussion on Madrid City Council. I will attempt to briefly explain the genealogy of these terms in relation to sound and space, generating tools for thinking about other policies that impact on our aural spaces.

Sounds in a space

Just as geometry governed the visual nature of modern architecture and design, silence as abstraction must have governed aural architecture and urban planning. Although this strays from the topic of discussion, it is nevertheless important to explain that there is a phenomenological perception of space through hearing. In connection with aural architectures, several

authors have pointed out that the use of sound-absorbing materials in buildings has gradually diminished the human being's capacity to perceive space through hearing.³ This makes the construction of social meanings even more complex. "The sound dimension," says Ricardo Atienza, "continues to be treated from a negative angle, reduced to acoustic absorption and /or insulation devices, or to restrictions of use for certain levels of noise. We therefore cast a slant on every qualitative description of a sound environment in favour of a strictly quantitative analysis, which is a necessary but insufficient analysis."⁴

But cities were always going to be full of living people, and everything that is alive has to make a noise because silence only exists in the void. Tailor-made for cars, cities would soon become infernal spaces but, as we shall see, the silencing regulations for urban spaces predated industrialisation. This is how the *health and safety* and police departments emerged – not so much to improve the existing soundscape but to create another one in memory of a lost abstraction. Thus did noise become debris to be eliminated or, better still, moved out to some suburb where legislators could no longer hear it.

The anti-noise campaign was initially led by a specific stratum of society which was not only unwilling to listen and share a set of rights and a territory they thought belonged exclusively to

3. E. Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and The Culture of Listening in America 1900-1933* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2004). The presentation lecture is also available at www.mitworld.mit.edu, video no. 19, of 26 September 2002, pp. 18–20. B. Blesser and L. Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 11–15.

4. R. Atienza, *Identidad Sonora Urbana: Tiempo Sonido y Proyecto Urbano*. (Grenoble: Cresson, 2008), p. 4. Available at www.cresson.archi.fr

them, but also had not the slightest intention of listening to the sound produced by others. The first policies that governed spaces according to their sounds were not based on learning to listen and sharing spaces, but on one group imposing silence and order on another group. This explains why the police powers that regulate our aural spaces have been limited to imposing what to say and at what volume: we are not willing to listen to each other and the laws with which they have taught us how to interact with each other are rooted in those regulations.

In thinking about a policy for aural spaces, I have focused on discovering the police and legislative limits imposed on the so-called *public space* in a specific city and presenting a genealogy of these government departments. I hope in this way to help create another tool for understanding sound policies and, in conjunction with other cultural productions, gradually generate new listening policies.

I am going to make three distinctions about space and then discuss them. The first distinction refers to *private spaces*, or rather, intimate spaces. There has been much discussion about the privatisation of acoustic spaces, among other things because mobile technologies have enabled sound to create subjective spaces that alter the geographical perception. Of all the essays on this subject, I am

only going to mention Michael Bull's *Thinking about Sound, Proximity and Distance in Western Experience. The Case of Odysseus's Walkman* (2002). This example is interesting because it deals with the myth of Odysseus, which Michel Foucault used in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. According to Foucault, certain classic philosophers believed that hearing was the most *pathetikos* sense, the least rational, and the sound isolation that Odysseus's mariners used therefore served them as protection.⁵ Wax ear plugs became a substitute for the mechanical system of halting the flow of information embodied in the eyelids. With mobile sound devices, an intimate acoustic space is created in which the earphones become eyelids, or at least artificial filters for the ears, which while possibly alienating us can also protect us, for example, from the piped music in a supermarket.

The second distinction is *public space*, which should really be defined as a common framework for individuals, a space in which to socialise personal and civic experiences, to exercise our social coexistence and participation rights. Nowadays, however, it is defined as the space governed by the oligopoly between the government and economic forces. In other words, it is a space we share with other people but which, in accordance with economic, legislative and police regulations, does not belong to us. It has become the place of social exchange where

5. Plutarch in *De audiendo* (On the Hearing of Lectures). Hearing is the most *logikos* and most *pathetikos* of the senses (the most passive of all the senses). It is impossible to stop listening, and at the same time the soul is most easily bewitched through hearing, both through rhetoric and through the positive and harmful effects of music. But Plutarch states that it is the most *logikos* and that it can receive *logos* better than any other sense. "Virtue can only be learned through hearing. Because virtue cannot be dissociated from *logos*, that is from rational language, from language that is present, formulated, verbally articulated in sounds and rationally articulated by reason." M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, op. cit.

we are told what to listen to and what to say: where aurality is legislated by the representative organs of power. In this essay I would like to analyse noise regulation in Madrid in recent years, which under the banner of noise pollution the city police department has extended to aural spaces. However, noise is not the same thing as noise pollution: as stated in *Atmósfera::Sustrato_Ruido* [Atmosphere::Substratum_Noise], "Noise is anti-common".⁶

The third distinction, *common space* (*our common space*), is the space that belongs to the union of subjectivities – that is, the space regulated by individuals. In this space, we should be the ones constructing the aural relations – they are part of our responsibilities as citizens – as opposed to byelaws and a system that encourages 'someone else' to assume these commitments.

Aural policies for space

Any policy for managing our common space should be based on how to say and how to hear, on how to listen and, therefore, on how to think. Aural space can be regarded as a noisy substratum in which a series of relations are laid down between what is said and what is heard, which allows us – if we are so inclined – to begin to think together. I am defining aurality here in its widest sense, as everything relating

to listening. In communication theory, aurality is defined as the interstitial connection in literary art between the listener and the spoken or recited interpretation of the written language. When I use the term "aurality" here to describe the connection between saying and hearing, I do so in an attempt to broaden the spectrum of analysis to the sounds that are produced and perceived without there necessarily being any communicative intention in either of the actions. In other words, I am including all the noises produced by human activity, which are part of our responsibility and should be treated as something more than worthless debris. We need to start listening to noise as a signifier, as a sound, so that once the inherited negative connotations have been lost it can be seen in the light of its causes and political meanings.

This listening policy, this reflection on what is heard, encompasses both messages and debris – that is, linguistic constructions such as music and verbal discourse as well as the sound produced by other activities such as movement and, in short, simply being alive. Legislation tends to focus on regulating the noise produced, on punishing 'incorrect' uses of sound determined in relation to quantity rather than quality, lecturing us on how to produce less noise and live in silence. And yet the creation of a habitable common space partly revolves around how to hear, how to listen to other things and how to think

6. V. Pérez and E. Tomás, *Manifiesto#Atmósfera::Sustrato_Ruido*: "Noise is anti-common. It is the debris of human activity which no one seems to want to claim. It belongs to all of us because it represents all of us. It is a free, indomitable resource, a timid representative of human activity that disappears the very moment it appears. It exists but it isn't always here." www.ultranoise.es

based on listening, rather than around authority over the speaker.

Thinking as an action has traditionally been associated with silence. “*Noise is the greatest enemy of intelligence*”,⁷ stated a poster for a demonstration against noise pollution. In antiquity, the listening tradition, as the first step in the subjectivisation of the philosophical linguistic discourse, was a maxim. Meanwhile, Michel Foucault introduced his chapter on listening by referring to philosophical ascesis, which he described as a subjectivisation of the discourse of truth – in other words, appropriating the discourses we listen to for ourselves.⁸ To accept this point, we must admit that artistic discourse is on the same level as philosophical discourse, and that through this language we are able to grasp the *mystic truths* that the artist reveals.

There is also a connection – albeit incidental – with religious ascesis, for example in the way in which St John of the Cross inverted his recurring “blind leap in the dark”. It may seem funny or even ironic, but there is a certain connection between this mysticism and the search for silence. In the film *Into Great Silence* (Gröning 2005), there is an inevitable connection between listening and ascesis, which to a certain extent creates relations based on the act of listening in the

common space that the characters share. There is always an interesting link between the search for silence and a certain type of spirituality. For Karin Bijsterveld, silence might mean culturally isolated, a place in which to retreat to work with the spirit.⁹ The essay “The soundscape and spirituality” also refers to the space of spirituality as a place in which to find silence.¹⁰

As in other cases, the boundaries for this platonic quest can be found in the universe: silence only exists in the void of outer space, which is why to a certain extent human beings associate silence with death. “In space no one can hear you scream” stated the poster for the film *Alien* (Scott 1979),



Project of a poster for the public-awareness advertising campaign on excessive noise pollution, 2007, designed by Rocío Labrador.

7. “Marcha silenciosa contral el Ruido,” 26 April 2007, at www.hoy.com.ec

8. “Listening is the first moment in the process through which the truth perceived, the truth properly heard and assimilated, is – so to speak – drawn into the individual, is embedded in him and begins to become *suus* (to become his), thus constituting the matrix of the ethos. The passage on the transition from *aletheia* to ethos (from the discourse of truth to what will become the fundamental rule of conduct) certainly begins in the act of listening.” M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, op. cit.

9. K. Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound. Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2008), p. 62.

10. H. Schwartz, “Noise and silence. The soundscape and spirituality” in *Realizing the Ideal. The Responsibility of the World’s Religions. Section IV Religion and the Ideal Environment*. (Seoul, 1995) in www.nonoise.org

as if reminding us that in antiquity cities ideally ended at the point beyond which a cry for help could no longer be heard.¹¹ Peter Cusack made a similar proposition in his Sounds from Dangerous Places project, broadcast as part of the BBC's *Sound of Silence* programme, which examined a specific type of silence in places where major environmental damage had occurred, such as Chernobyl and the oil wells in Iran.¹²

That silence does not exist is obvious, although the concept still contains significant political undertones in relation to urban planning and those who control this. Apparently, the obligation to be silent, or rather the spatial separation between noise and silence, dates back to ancient Rome, when manual labour had to be conducted outside the hearing range of professors, and the regulation was reinstated in Leipzig in 1617.¹³ These approaches to silence do not only tie in with certain modes of knowledge but also with a certain social stratification. By the 19th century, silence had become a precious commodity in Europe, as illustrated by the motto of the anti-noise society led by Theodor Lessing: "*Tranquillity is distinguished*".¹⁴ The upper classes began to complain about the sounds produced by the lower classes, wishing to control the acoustic spaces in the same way that they owned the land.¹⁵

One of the first campaigns against street musicians was conducted by Charles Babbage, a mathematician ahead of his time who wanted to build a mechanical calculator and devised a computing system based on a loom that operated with punch cards. It would appear that street musicians made him lose 25% of his precious time.¹⁶ During the remaining 75%, Babbage devised machines that required engines to run. These noisy *steampunk* fantasies clearly illustrate the type of ideology associated with the prohibition. Indeed, the same ideology of distinction and comfort continues to this day: in Spain, the poster for International Noise Awareness Day uses a similar motto to that of Theodor Lessing cited above: "- noise = + comfort".

My intention in presenting all this information is not to make a value judgment on noise and silence, but rather to illustrate some of the motivations that their use in representative politics have generated. Silence and tranquillity are evidently desirable, but just as the methods of harmonic musical organisation have occasionally been presented as metaphors for authoritarian governments, so too there may well be a connection between the imposition of silence and the authority of the classes that proposed these laws.

11. A. Cayrle, *Autumn Leaves. Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice*, (Paris: Double Entrade, 2007). p. 4.

12. "Sound of Silence," BBC, 31 April 2007, at www.bbc.co.uk

13. K. Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound. Technology, Culture and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century*, op. cit., p. 69.

14. K. Bijsterveld, "Diabolical Symphony in the Mechanical Age," in L. Back and M. Bull, *Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), p. 172.

15. B. Blesser and L. Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 2006), p. 106.

Madrid City Council's Noise Brigades

Nowadays, Charles Babbage's worries have been re-cast in terms of value. As the executive member for the environment at Madrid City Council, Ana Botella, says, "Noise can't be free".¹⁷ The aim of this analysis is to explore the real reasons behind this ecophile crusade and prove that the ideas formulated about noise and silence are not always connected with the environment. I will begin with a local example – Madrid City Council's anti-noise campaign.

Madrid's anti-noise programme was based on two fundamental points: the creation of a noise map and the launch of the *Noise Brigades*. As a marginal although no less important aspect, a manual on aural education was proposed for primary school teachers and pupils. The noise map is based on a European directive which dictates that all towns and cities with a population of over 250,000 are obliged to report their noise pollution levels.¹⁸ The Madrid noise map was drawn up between 2004 and 2007, based on 8,450 recordings in which 32% exceeded the permitted 65 decibels. During the first quarter of 2008, another 2,167 recordings were made with identical results.¹⁹ This map is a new version of the one jointly drawn up by the Spanish Higher Council of Scientific Research (CSIC) and the City Council between 1985 and 1990.²⁰ During

the public presentation, the mayor and the executive member for the environment described the map as a tool for discovering the "reality" of noise in Madrid – a supposedly interactive tool which citizens can use to inform the municipal authorities about infringements. Naturally, citizens cannot use sounds they have recorded themselves and, as we shall see, not all complaints will be treated in the same way.

Presented to the media by the mayor and executive member for the environment on 3 June 2008, the *Noise Brigades* are mixed patrols of police officers and environment agents whose mission is to eradicate the noise associated with the city's night life. In actual fact, the Brigades had been presented in public in 2004 in relation to the purchase of 64 sound level meters and 32 sound gauges.²¹ This act of propaganda was accompanied by the ostentatious purchase of cars fitted with Brüel & Kjaer sound level meters, described on the company's website as "noise sentinel".²²

The alliance between environment and health and safety was struck by Ana Botella and the city council's executive member for safety and services, Pedro Luis Calvo Poch, whom the media had

To the right, -"Two years of noise, night and day, and now this nonsense". Advert intervention from the public-awareness campaign on excessive noise pollution launched by the Madrid city council in 2007.

16. "Charles Babbage: El padre de la computación moderna" at www.quantum-networks.com

17. "El ruido no puede salir gratis" at www.elmundo.es

18. 2002/49/EC – Assessment and Management of Environmental Noise at www.eur.lex.eu

19. "Sin tregua contra el ruido" at www.minimadrid.es.

20. "Madrid ya cuenta con un mapa del ruido que permitirá actuar en las zonas de mayor contaminación acústica" at www.lukor.com.

21. "Día Internacional de Concienciación sobre el Ruido. La brigada contra el ruido atenderá durante 24 horas. Se equipa con 64 sonómetros y 32 calibradores" at www.infoecologia.com.

22. www.bksv.com.

described in 1994 as a politician with a liking for political confrontation and promoting political stances without the use of firearms.²³ A supporter of the use of surveillance cameras rather than hiring external private security patrols,²⁴ Calvo was the driving force behind the enactment of Organic Law 4/1997, which regulates the use of video cameras as persuasive reinforcement for Security Forces and Corps in public places.²⁵ He supports the regulations concerning the obligation to inform citizens that they are being recorded even for private organisations such as banks,²⁶ and he also championed the use of video surveillance in non-places such as Madrid's city transport company.²⁷

The professional profile of the person in charge of the police officers in the Brigades is highly significant, in that he is a politician who proposes control methods based on the internalisation of police control rather than on force. Fighting noise has become a method for managing space and eradicating the category of common space. This is achieved not through violence



Above, Mayor and Environment Counselor visit anechoic chamber at the Local Acoustics Center in Madrid in 2007.

but a technological mechanism that disciplines what is said and what is done. Madrid City Council's promotion of the use of cameras is a clear-cut and broadly accepted case of disciplining individuals through surveillance. The fact that the Noise Brigades have been presented to the public by the same government body suggests that their function may also be of a disciplinary nature. These measures not only undermine the freedom to use common spaces – they also establish when and how to produce sound.

Naturally, not all control methods are negative – some are tools to permit coexistence through consensus, but this consensus has to be collective rather than imposed. I am not saying that sound should not be controlled, but merely questioning the reasons for regulations.

Continuing with Madrid City Council, let us look for example at how the Brigades enforce the noise regulations. These establish that any complaints about a neighbour, bar or street drinking reported at the weekend are to be processed immediately and a high fine served by Monday. In the case of areas adjacent to motorways, building works and airports, an inquiry is to be launched which may or may not lead to penalisation for the producers of these sounds. In fact, it has been proved that the Barajas noise map drawn up in response to complaints from citizens distorts the

23. "Pedro Calvo, el objetor del PP" at www.elmundo.es.

24. "Entrevista a Pedro Calvo Poch" at www.borrmart.es.

25. "¡Cuidado! Nos vigilan" at www.elpais.com.

26. "El ayuntamiento de Madrid planea vigilar con 20 cámaras la Plaza Mayor" at www.belt.es.

27. "Proyecto de videovigilancia embarca en el autobús" at <http://www.emtmadrid.com>.

truth in relation to the area of the town affected by the airport's Terminal 4.²⁸

In her presentation of the Noise Brigades and their measures, Ana Botella, as executive member for the environment, spoke about "zero tolerance" for night clubs that infringed the noise regulations and laws. This attitude is not just restricted to people in office. All the other members in the municipal government and those who aspire to become part of it have joined the anti-noise campaign based on the historical terms mentioned above.

Earlier this year, the opposition party exposed the ineffectiveness of the brigades, which it seems deal with only 1% of the complaints reported:²⁹ 444 in total, which is 80 less than those dealt with in 2004 before the brigades were created.³⁰ As usual, Madrid's political parties have not offered any acceptable solutions, resorting instead to their now jaded criticism of the ineffectuality of yet another measure. The majority opposition party levels its criticism at the ineffectiveness of the measures concerning the noise pollution from building works, the outward sign of speculation, but continues to accept noise without making the slightest reflection.³¹ Other parties with a smaller representation in the municipal government focus on the problems in areas near airports, a source of complaints that the official organisations persist in ignoring.³² Meanwhile, the complaints received from residents' associations are

conspicuous by their absence both in the actions launched by the party in power and in the eyes of the law. Ruidos.org, the largest nation-wide association, receives complaints and denunciations principally about street drinking, noisy neighbours and areas adjacent to airports.³³

There is a third and more interesting part of the anti-noise programme which has received less media coverage. In theory, measures such as these should be both palliative and preventive, prevention in this case meaning education in listening.³⁴ In 2007 the Noise Centre at the CSIC and the city council's Noise Control Centre jointly published a manual entitled *Educación para vivir sin ruido. Actividades Ruidos y sonidos en la ciudad. Primer ciclo de educación primaria. Material de apoyo para el profesorado* [Educating for living without noise. Activities: Noise and sounds in the city. First cycle of primary education. Support material for teachers]. The book adopts the form of a teachers' guide and its goal is to raise awareness about the value of certain sounds in relation to others. One aspect that sets it completely apart from the repressive policies used as propaganda is its general insistence on the need to listen as a basic principle of noise education.

These three points formed the basis of a publicity campaign launched in 2007, which has nevertheless failed to amount to much more. In any case,

28. "El mapa del ruido de barajas 'es falso'" at www.elmundo.es.

29. "Las Patrullas mixtas contra el ruido interponen en casi dos años 444 sanciones, la mayoría a domicilios y bares de copas" at www.adn.es.

30. "El ruido no puede salir gratis" at www.elmundo.es.

31. Pedro Santin, "El ruido preocupa a la ciudadanía, pero no al PP en el Ayuntamiento de Madrid" at www.psoemadrid.org.

32. "IU acusa al alcalde de 'olvidar' a los mediadores del ruido anunciados y cree que no fue más que una 'gallardonada'" at www.Europapress.es.

33. "Noticias sobre el ruido" at www.Ruidos.org.

34. "Ruido, sonidos, salud y derechos" at www.Ruidos.org

we must neither lose sight of nor stop listening to the police. After all this campaigning, there is an obvious shift and a growing feeling about what noise actually means for the citizens of a city such as Madrid. Let me stress again that I am not defending noise over silence, but trying to discover some of the political and economic meanings assigned to noise by representative government.

Looking back to New York in 1889 and all the talk about “unnecessary noises” begs the following question: Which noises are necessary and for whom? And once again we see the definition of noise as a sound that produces no value and is opposed to its production. The definition of noise as something we do not want to hear may be useful to us in relation to our subjectivity but also in our opposition to sounds inherent to human activity. Let us not forget, however, that some of the sounds that are forced upon us are not subject to the aforementioned legislation, and yet quite often we find these non-penalised sounds irritating. In this respect, when complaints about building works are received, they are not only about the sound of the machinery, which is actually an interesting sound: they tend to relate to noise as the signifier of a specific political message, as the discourse of an oppressive urban planning policy based on speculation. Furthermore, this urban planning policy is the spearhead of an economic policy that

has not only forgotten all about the community and our right to use the spaces in the city, but is turning public space into a vacant plot to be seized by private interests.

In short, the police and the environment department are working in unison to draw up the Madrid land use plan, rather than to address safety and ecological issues. And while this is obvious, it is nevertheless interesting to note the role played by the Noise Brigades, one of whose duties is to eradicate leisure venues from residential areas and reduce their opening hours. Part of a wider gentrification programme, this step has already been witnessed in a specific area of the city centre now known as TriBall, a former red-light district where special incentives have led to the opening of designer clothing shops.

Added to this sonic representation of speculation and the appropriation of common spaces are the anti-noise and pro-noise policies. On 5 January 2010 the Patio Maravillas, a multi-purpose autonomously-governed space, was cleared by the police, among other things because of reports of noise from the members of the Vecinos del Patio Maravillas residents' association. That same day, in one of the city's shopping districts, the passers-by and residents were tortured (literally) by the noise coming from a set of loudspeakers on the façade the Corte Inglés department store.

These local examples confirm various broader concepts. Noise is not only

unwanted sound: in the eyes of the law, noise is often sound that produces no economic value and is not derived from activities that do produce it – or at least it has no value for the members of the oligarchy that runs the public institutions.

Other examples seen and heard in this city which reinforce the theory about capitalism's recent ecophile shift can be witnessed in a variety of advertising campaigns. For instance the German company AEG-Electrolux is one of the official sponsors of International Noise Awareness Day. The company's marketing campaigns are usually priceless examples of aesthetic perversion. One such campaign consisted of searching for the noisiest dishwasher in the Madrid region.³⁵ In another campaign conducted in 2007, the company placed huge decibel meters on billboards in different cities around the country, in the fashion of public thermometers, speedometers and clocks. The meters demonstrated that roads with heavy traffic exceeded the 65 decibels recommended by the World Health Organisation.³⁶ In other words, AEG launched an electrical appliance sales strategy based on the creation of a social control device, in this case related to sound. Meanwhile, the campaigns conducted by AEG-Electrolux have actually managed to create a consumer who not only looks for visual design and efficiency in its electrical appliances but also sound design and, as if repeating the

mottoes of bygone societies, seeks luxury in silence.

Pikolín also conducted a campaign in Madrid under the slogan *Que nada te quite el sueño* [Don't let anything keep you awake]. The commercial was directed by Nacho Vigalondo who, imitating the style of the French film, commercial and music video director Michel Gondry, explored all the usual neighbourhood sounds that we find so annoying. Like AEG, Pikolín joined in International Noise Awareness Day by launching its *Susurro* and *Sosiego* mattresses. The Pikolín advertising executives also conducted an intervention in the Malasaña neighbourhood which consisted of soundproofing a building in the Plaza de San Ildefonso, which read "Casa insonorizada. Por un descanso sin Ruido" [Soundproofed house. For noiseless sleep].

This square is an iconic place for street drinking in the Malasaña neighbourhood and it had already acted as the backdrop to another advertising campaign, by Red Bull,



Above, billboard with decibel meter from the AEG advertising campaign *In a noisy world, appliances that aren't*, placed in Princesa street, Madrid, in 2008.

35. "AEG celebra el Día mundial contra el Ruido con un concurso para encontrar el lavavajillas más molesto de la Comunidad" at www.ecodiario.eleconomista.es.

36. "Campaña alternativa de AEG para ofrecerse como solución a la contaminación acústica" at www.marketingnews.es.

37. www.quenadatequiteelsueno.es

entitled “Malasaña Ready to Serve”. The logo for this campaign was a shouting mouth. Curiously, one of the activities consisted of a “silent party” in which earphones and energy drinks were handed out to all the passers-by.³⁸ All of this highlights yet again the conflict between private, public and common spaces.

By way of conclusion

If cameras exemplify a city under surveillance, then Madrid City Council's use of noise pollution byelaws for police, commercial and urban planning purposes is yet another example of a city silenced. Environment byelaws, historically dictated for less than reliable purposes, have been used in this case as tools for gentrifying certain areas and as propaganda in others. But this essay is not intended as a partisan attack; at this moment in time, there is no hope for representative policies on this issue because the responsibility for creating a space for community relations lies with us. What I have tried to do here is show the complex conceptual mirror of words such as noise and silence, based in this instance on their meanings in the contexts of urban planning and politics. Thinking about space from sound obviously implies thinking about the cities that some of us live in.

To put into practice the individual theories that people regard as necessary, we would also need to

apply some of these principles to the way we listen and to our arguments for criticising certain sound-related policies. Thus, the authoritarian practice about what we say, which also directly affects how our common spaces are managed, needs to be questioned and re-analysed. If the sound stratum in some of our cities is noisy, then perhaps we should use this reality as a premise for constructing the way we listen, rather than imposing – or relying on those who impose – sound models based on inadequate urban planning projects. Thinking about urban planning on the basis of regulating its sounds is a way of addressing how we want to discover the spaces we live in through their inherent sounds. If silence is a utopian principle imposed by outmoded urban planning projects, then it may be impossible for our cities to be silent and more urgent, therefore, to learn how to listen rather than issue the order for silence.