
REVIEWS

Article received on March 11th 2025

Article accepted on April 20th 2025

UDC 781.2(049.32)

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**Sonic Materiality and the Ethics of Everyday Listening:
A Review of Marcel Cobussen's *Engaging with Everyday Sounds*
Marcel Cobussen**

Engaging with Everyday Sounds

Cambridge UK, Open Book Publishers, 2022, 114 pp.

ISBN (Paperback) 9781800643925; ISBN (Hardback) 9781800643932;

ISBN (Digital PDF) 9781800643949

The interdisciplinary field of sound studies has witnessed significant expansion in recent decades, moving far beyond musical concerns to encompass broader questions of sonic experience, perception, and materiality. Within this evolving scholarly landscape, Marcel Cobussen's *Engaging with Everyday Sounds* emerges as a theoretically sophisticated yet accessible contribution that reconsiders fundamental assumptions about our auditory engagement with the world.¹ As

Professor of Auditory Culture and Music Philosophy at Leiden University, Cobussen brings considerable expertise to this relatively compact volume, offering insights that resonate across disciplinary boundaries while maintaining theoretical coherence and methodological rigor.

This review examines Cobussen's text through three critical lenses: its theoretical framework and methodological approach; its engagement with key concepts in contemporary sound studies; and its contribution to ethical and politi-

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¹ Marcel Cobussen and Francesco Aletta discuss the book *Engaging with Everyday Sounds* in the podcast "The Rest Is Just Noise:

Engaging with Everyday Sounds and Marcel Cobussen",

<https://www.buzzsprout.com/1438372/episodes/12965829>.

cal dimensions of sonic experience. Throughout, I aim at situating the book's scholarly contributions within broader conversations about sound, materiality, and everyday life.

Cobussen organizes his investigation into different sections that progress from theoretical groundwork to practical explorations of soundscapes, ultimately culminating in an examination of ethical and political implications. The book's theoretical foundation rests upon what Cobussen terms "sonic materialism", a framework that positions sound not merely as an object of perception but as an active, material force that shapes and is shaped by human experience. This conceptualization aligns with recent materialist turns in cultural theory and philosophy, particularly new materialist and posthumanist approaches that challenge anthropocentric models of perception and agency.

Methodologically, the book makes a significant contribution through its multimodal approach. Cobussen integrates traditional academic prose with field recordings, images, and ethnographic observations, creating a text that attempts to embody the multisensory nature of its subject matter. This integration of theory and practice reflects a growing recognition within sound studies of the limitations of purely textual approaches to sonic phenomena. As Cobussen convincingly argues, the study of sound requires methods that acknowledge its temporal, spatial, and experiential dimensions – dimensions that often exceed conventional academic formats.

The section on field recording methodology demonstrates particular sophis-

tication in its reflexive awareness of how recording technologies (including human ears!) mediate sonic experience. Rather than treating field recordings as transparent documents of acoustic reality, Cobussen interrogates how these technological practices themselves shape what is heard and how it is interpreted. This critical stance toward methodology reflects broader concerns in sensory ethnography and sound studies about the politics of representation and the non-neutrality of documentary practices.

Central to Cobussen's analysis is the dialectical relationship between familiar and unfamiliar sonic experiences. In "The Familiarity of Everyday Sounds", he examines how habitual auditory environments become integrated into the fabric of daily life, often receding from conscious attention while nevertheless shaping affect, behaviour, and social interaction. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's theories of everyday practice and John Cage's aesthetic of attention, Cobussen illustrates how "ordinary" sounds constitute a significant yet often overlooked dimension of lived experience.

The complementary (but not opposite) section, "The Unfamiliarity of Everyday Sounds", explores moments of sonic disruption and estrangement that bring sound back into conscious awareness. Here, Cobussen's analysis resonates with Viktor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization. His discussion of sonic estrangement offers valuable insights into how disruptions in expected soundscapes can provoke new modes of listening and awareness.

Throughout these sections, Cobussen engages thoughtfully with key figures

in sound studies, including R. Murray Schafer, Brandon LaBelle, and Jean-Luc Nancy, while extending (or misusing?) their work in productive directions. His reading of Schafer's concept of the soundscape, for instance, acknowledges its foundational importance while also addressing its nuances, particularly its approach to sound evaluation. Similarly, his engagement with Nancy's phenomenological account of listening acknowledges its philosophical elegance while pushing toward more material and embodied accounts of sonic experience.

The book's extensive engagement with contemporary theoretical frameworks demonstrates Cobussen's comprehensive understanding of the field. His ability to synthesize complex philosophical concepts into accessible analytical frameworks provides readers with valuable tools for understanding sonic phenomena across various contexts. This theoretical sophistication is complemented by concrete examples that ground abstract concepts in tangible sonic experiences.

However, I believe the book's most significant contribution comes in its final analytical section, "The Ethics and Politics of Everyday Sounds", where Cobussen articulates the ethical responsibilities associated with listening and sound-making. Here, he develops an account of sonic ethics that extends beyond questions of noise pollution or acoustic ecology to encompass broader issues of power, inclusion, and exclusion within sonic environments.

Cobussen's discussion of concepts like "sonic solastalgia" (a term derived

from environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht's notion of "solastalgia", describing distress caused by environmental change) is particularly compelling. By examining how transformations in sonic environments can produce experiences of displacement and alienation, Cobussen convincingly demonstrates how soundscapes are implicated in broader social and political structures. His analysis of how urban planning, architectural design, and public policy decisions shape sonic experience along lines of class, race, and ability offers a sophisticated understanding of sound's intersection with social justice concerns.

The book's emphasis on listening as an ethical practice, one that involves responsibility toward others and attention to marginalized sonic experiences, represents a valuable contribution to growing discussions about the politics of perception. Cobussen effectively demonstrates how apparently neutral sonic preferences often reflect and reinforce social hierarchies, challenging readers to develop more reflective and inclusive listening practices.

This ethical dimension distinguishes Cobussen's work from more technically-oriented approaches to sound studies. Cobussen positions listening as a practice with profound ethical implications, and he elevates everyday sonic engagement to a matter of social and political consequence. This framework provides scholars and practitioners with a compelling theoretical basis for considering the ethical dimensions of sonic environments in contexts ranging from urban planning to artistic practice.

Overall, the book creates an immersive scholarly experience that mirrors its subject matter. This methodological innovation demonstrates how research can adapt to better engage with sensory phenomena that exceed traditional academic formats. The book's engagement with field recording practices is particularly noteworthy for its reflexive awareness of how recording technologies themselves shape perception and interpretation. Rather than treating field recordings as transparent documents, Cobussen examines how these practices mediate our understanding of sonic environments. This attention to methodological reflexivity enhances the book's scholarly rigor while providing valuable insights for practitioners engaged in sound documentation and analysis.

For those concerned with the sonic dimensions of contemporary life – whether from perspectives of cultural theory, urban studies, philosophy, or ar-

tistic practice – Cobussen's work provides both theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches that brighten the significance of everyday sounds in constituting our shared social world. In an era of increasing audio-visual saturation, this attention to the subtle but powerful ways sound shapes experience offers an important corrective to predominantly visual models of culture and perception. Cobussen's integration of theory and practice throughout the book demonstrates a commitment to embodied understanding that advances *Engaging with Everyday Sounds* beyond conventional academic treatments. In modelling an approach to sound that is simultaneously rigorous, reflexive, and experientially grounded, Cobussen offers not just a scholarly account of sonic phenomena but an invitation to transformed listening practices that recognize the profound social, political, and ethical dimensions of our everyday sonic encounters.