



Juhana Venäläinen

Aural Commons without an Aural Community? On the Difficulties of Living Together in a City with Sound

Abstract

This article explores the ontological, epistemological, and ethical implications of understanding urban soundscapes as *aural commons*: as dynamic fields of action shaped together by various actors with heterogeneous valuations. Adopting the perspective of the commons implies that the management of soundscapes should not be framed in terms of isolated sound (re)sources but through the social, cultural, and political processes by which the actors inhabiting the shared acoustic environment seek to make sense of their inevitable coexistence. The notion of aural commons is illustrated with a particular noise dispute between a multi-story night spot and its neighbors in Helsinki, Finland, from a media ethnographic approach. The analysis shows that relevant arenas and practices through which differing sonic valuations could be mediated are lacking. Noise disputes in administrative processes and their media representations are translated into a technical discourse that fails to create common ground for appreciating the differences in living together in a city with sound. By focusing on the potential of *commoning* as a social process, the article proposes an alternative approach to understanding and improving the socio-cultural and socio-material dynamics of urban soundscapes.

Keywords: urban soundscapes, aural commons, noise complaints, noise disputes, media ethnography

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Introduction

Many debates around the commons begin not with great optimism, but with a grain of cautiousness, noting that our global commons, our shared heritage, is threatened. “*Commons, once alienated or destroyed [...] are not easily reproducible or recoverable,*” warns legal scholar Ugo Mattei, pointing to the widespread tendency of privatizing previously public-managed assets such as railroads, airlines, healthcare, water supply, and universities (Mattei 2011, v–vii). In a similarly cautionary tone, anthropologist Donald M. Nonini writes in the introductory article of a special issue on commons research that in recent decades,

[...] corporations allied with Northern scientists and universities, national and regional governments, and international financial institutions (IFIs) have [...] acted to dispossess large proportions of the world’s population of their commons’ resources and enclose them for profit making.” (Nonini 2007, 1–2)

The present article focuses on a particular area of what can be understood—and has been understood (e.g. Ampuja 2007; 2008)—as an endangered commons: the quotidian co-inhabited acoustic environment. Especially in the urban context, noise conflicts have become a persistent topic that are debated both in the public and private spheres. However, noise as a social problem is a particularly fluid and ambiguous notion. Definitions of noise oscillate between the subjective and objective perspectives (Eriksson-Aras 2017), and conceptions of how noisiness fits in the urban space are deeply enmeshed in lifestyle preferences and socio-cultural contexts (e.g. Garcia 2018; Alexander & Stokoe 2019; Nielsen, Jørgensen & Braae 2019; Weber, Helal, Lesem, Maaß, Schwedler, Wohldorf & Würbach 2019). There is also a considerable amount of individual variation in tolerance for different qualities and quantities of sound (Guski 1977; Smith 2003; Van Kamp, Job, Hatfield, Haines, Stellato & Stansfeld 2004; Dzhambov & Dimitrova 2015; Gille, Marquis-Favre & Weber 2016).

Since noise abatement as a regulatory practice requires pragmatic standards to be feasible (Bijsterveld 2008, 258), it typically relies on the relatively unambiguous yardsticks, essentially decibel measurements. This demarcation is justified by the need to improve public health (see Moscoso, Peck & Eldridge 2018), which is also the key “validation register” (Cardoso 2019) through which noise abatement is legally codified. While some parts of the noise problem can certainly be tackled through monitoring and enforcing clear-cut decibel limits, heated discussion still abounds about whether noisiness is an elemental and unavoidable aspect of urban lifestyles (e.g. Ampuja 2007, 233–234) or whether a resident’s right to good sleep should override in the event of conflicting interests. When noise as a physical phenomenon is articulated to economic,

social, cultural, and regulatory strata, the seemingly simple measurements soon evolve into a whole field of *sound-politics* (Cardoso 2019): contentious socio-material assemblages of living together in a city with sound.

In this article, I experiment with the ontological and *onto-ethico-epistemological* (Barad 2007) implications of portraying the urban auditory realm as fundamentally shared—as an *aural commons*. The aim of this approach is to challenge the conventional ways of framing noise conflicts from the perspective of individuals' rights. The notion of *commoning*, as employed in this article, also questions the sensibleness of attempting to manage noise disputes through top-down administrative processes—processes that depend on technical procedures to resolve issues that are not technical by nature.

The dynamics of “not-commoning”—the inverse of a fruitful negotiation about a common soundscape—are illustrated with an example of a particular urban noise conflict in Helsinki, Finland. The analysis reveals how the abstraction and objectivation of noise disputes work to amplify the dividing lines between the different uses and users of an urban space. The bureaucratic and externalizing approach undermines the construction of grassroots socio-cultural practices that could help to create a shared understanding of noise problems. The examined case is a typical example of a potential aural commons that, however, lacks an aural community that could come together to make sense of its acoustic coexistence.

A natural starting point for a discussion about the urban acoustic environment is the concept of the soundscape as introduced by the Canadian composer and theorist R. Murray Schafer in the late 1970s. For Schafer, the soundscape was, first, a descriptive term that referred to the entirety of what could be heard in a place, including noises, sounds, and human melodies (Schafer [1977] 1994). However, it was also more than that: soundscape was a notion that alluded to an enormous societal and cultural change that would culminate in the “imperialistic spread of more and larger sounds into every corner of man's life” (ibid., 3). Deeply entwined in the emergence of the acoustic ecology movement was a concern about the sustainability and diversity of soundscapes; of the possibility of hearing preferable sounds over the presumedly ever-loudening backdrop of unsolicited noise.

In developing the notion of the aural commons, I draw on Schafer's influential term but also retune it along with the vocabulary of contemporary commons research. Inspired by commons theorists such as Massimo De Angelis (2017), I propose soundscape to be approached through its socio-cultural and socio-material dynamics that are always more-than-subjective—but also “more-than-objective.” This emphasis highlights the materially and discursively shaped ways of living together with sound—rather than the sound objects as such—as the key to understanding and appreciating a joint auditory realm.

The argument of the present article is structured as follows: First, I will describe the field of commons research as it took off in the 1960s from biologist Garrett Hardin's description of the "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin 1968) and later became an umbrella term for analyzing problems related to collective decision-making. Second, I will position the phenomena of sound and senses within the field of commons research and introduce *aural commons* as a concept that, in addition to providing a valuable perspective for soundscape research, transcends some of the established categorizations associated with commons-based methodologies. Then, to illustrate how the notion of aural commons can be utilized in empirical analysis, I will report on a media ethnographic excursion to Tres Bones Oy (*Bones*), a multi-story night spot and restaurant in Helsinki that ran into problems with the municipal environmental administration because of noise complaints from its neighbors. Finally, I will sum up how the notion of aural commons serves to challenge the resource-focused understandings of "the commons" and to improve understanding of the social-cultural and socio-material dynamics of an urban soundscape.

The "tragic" genesis of commons research

In *Keywords* (1983), Raymond Williams writes that the word *common* "has an extraordinary range of meaning" in English, with many meanings being inseparable from a "still active social history" (ibid., 70). Traditionally, in the English usage of the term, the commons referred to natural resources, such as grazing lands, forests, and fisheries, harnessed and enjoyed by the people living in the area, without any one of them having an exclusive or explicitly granted property right to the resources in question (Nonini 2007, 164; Hemmungs Wirtén 2008, 13–19; Hyde 2010, 43–44). In other geographical and political contexts, the right to the commons has been acknowledged with different terms. For example, in the Nordic countries, the freedom to roam in nature and to enjoy its offerings (berries, mushrooms, etc.) without permission from the landlord is still recognized in customary law as "everyman's rights" (see e.g. Environment.fi 2013). More generally, the still-active social history of the commons manifests itself in a plethora of activities from scientific publishing (Schweik 2007) to digital fabrication (Kostakis & Papachristou 2014) and urban activism (Cattaneo & Martínez 2014). Commons as a social movement appears as a smorgasbord of practices where people come together to experiment with more collaborative and less market-dependent ways of relating to their social and natural environments and of producing and utilizing valuable assets together. Simultaneously, research on the commons has grown into a broad methodological tradition that focuses on the

forms, practices, and preconditions of collective resource management (e.g., Ostrom 1990; Hess & Ostrom 2007).

Modern scholarly interest in the commons arose in the late 1960s. Biologist Garrett Hardin, in his seminal article about the “tragedy of the commons” (1968), expressed a sort of game-theoretical explanation to what he saw as a great problem of humankind: that unlimited access to limited resources will inevitably lead to overconsumption. The argument stems from a version of the free-rider problem, which assumes that human action is ultimately based on egoistic calculation. Every individual using the commons is, the argument goes, more concerned with maximizing personal utility than taking care of the common stock. Thus, while everyone would benefit from safeguarding the sustainability of the commons, there is no incentive that encourages or coerces any individual to do so. The tragedy comes to the fore when the institutional arrangements for regulating the use of a resource cannot prevent it from being overexploited. In the absence of effective regulation, granting open access to resources leads to their inevitable destruction, and finally, “freedom in a commons brings ruin to all” (ibid., 1244).

Hardin’s reasoning subscribes to an individualistic social ontology where economic agents are largely detached from their social, cultural, and historical underpinnings (see Stavrides 2016, 53; Valtonen 2011, 56–64). The protagonist of the tragedy resembles the textbook figure of *homo economicus*, an “economic man” capable of accurately weighing his preferences, gathering and processing all relevant information, making instant and flawless calculations, and always acting as rationally and predictably as a machine. This rather one-dimensional notion of human nature, as well as the questionable assumptions about the dynamics of collective decision-making, were later challenged in commons research. Most notably, Nobel-winning economist Elinor Ostrom (1990) has analyzed a plethora of commons systems around the world and found how communities in diverse cultural, geographical, and socio-economic settings have been able to manage their shared assets sustainably and thus evade tragedy.

Ostrom noticed that Hardin did not actually intend commons in the sense of commonly *managed* resources¹ but more akin to static collections that merely await appropriation and abuse. Hardin’s tragedy has hardly any management or even any meaningful communication between the parties. Thus, the dilemma

1 This was also explained by Hardin himself in 1994 in a short discussion article (“The tragedy of the unmanaged commons”) where he makes the distinction between managed and unmanaged commons but still maintains the original position that in a modern society, excluding very small communities, the only workable solutions for managing the commons are “privatism” (i.e. dividing the common property into many private properties) or “socialism” (i.e. appointing a manager to oversee the use). (Hardin 1994.)

can be more precisely described as *the tragedy of open access* (Hess & Ostrom 2007, 9; see also De Angelis 2017, 144–146). A similarly tilted perspective still dominates debates about urban noise conflicts: the cause of the noise “tragedy” is not so much the leaky and inevitably shared nature of sounds as such, but more likely the immaturity of relevant socio-cultural forms that would promote fertile forms of commoning within the urban context.

Aural commons, lost and found

While Hardin’s original concern goes back to the so-called natural commons (the environmental resources “given” to humankind), the idea of the commons has in recent decades been applied to more areas where the collective management of resources—be they “given” or “constructed”—is at stake (Bollier 2007; Nonini 2007; Bollier & Helfrich 2012). Whereas the first wave of commons research focused on assets such as irrigation systems, fisheries, and forests, the scope of analysis has approximately from the mid-1990s and onwards extended to include several kinds of human-made commons such as knowledge and cultural works. In these “new commons” (Hess 2008), resource scarcity (or *subtractability*, to use Ostrom’s term) does not always hold (Rose 1986; Lessig 2001; Scafidi 2005; Bricklin 2006; Boyle 2008). Put bluntly, if one catches a fish from a commons of a lake, there is instantly one less for others to get, but if you read an article from the commons of Wikipedia (see Lund & Venäläinen 2016), you have not reduced the potential for others to do so, on the contrary, you may even have expanded access through the viral spread of information.

In her meta-analysis from 2008, commons scholar Charlotte Hess attempted to map different branches of the then-existing commons research and came up with eight broad topic areas: infrastructure commons; neighborhood commons; medical and health commons; cultural commons; knowledge commons; markets as commons; global commons; and the “traditional” commons (such as local natural resource systems) (Hess 2008). Since then, there have been several attempts to construct similar taxonomies with different delineating criteria. For example, more than 90 “examples of common goods” are listed in P2P Foundation’s “Commons – FAQ” web page. These range from voluntary associations and family life to waterpower and living creatures (P2P Foundation 2017).

In a way, the ease of discovering new areas of commons just by appending the word after any attribute (think of “waterpower commons” or “living creature commons”) highlights the idea of commons as a very broadly applicable methodological perspective rather than a field of study delineated by its object. At the same time, as Massimo De Angelis (2017, 55) notes, there is a risk of

“conceptual meaninglessness” with the kind of lists that seem to extend the concept endlessly. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to try to identify the kinds of things and perspectives that are often included in the lists, as well as those that seem to be missing, to disinter the tacit epistemological and ontological commitments of the commons vocabulary.

Hess’s and P2P Foundation’s lists of the commons include, for example, ecological *systems*, human-made *institutions*, cultural *practices* as well as natural *processes*. What is curious is that the sensory realm, or more broadly the affective, embodied, and experiential relation of human beings to the world, seems to play a minor role or to fall in-between the categories. Where, if anywhere, would senses as commons and sensing-in-common fit in the taxonomies of commons types? Perhaps a reason for the difficulties in understanding sensory experiences as commons lies in the fact that sensory perceptions still appear as private and intimate affairs in the popular imagination: as psychic and personal events experienced by an *in-dividus* (individual)—someone who faces the world on her own and, in so doing, cannot be “divided.”

Attempts to theorize the sensory realm as a commons are sparse, but there have been some interesting attempts. In *Bodies in Code* (2012), media researcher Mark Hansen describes sensory commons as “the space that we human beings share by dint of our constitutive embodiment.” This space, he elaborates, includes not only the things we can sense but also the things that we cause to be sensed by others. From this perspective, the acoustic environment can be understood as a space of co-production populated by all the human and non-human actors involved in the processes that shape the audible world around us.

To describe the shared acoustic environment, I propose the term *aural commons* instead of “sonic commons” or “soundscape commons” to foreground the intersubjective experience of listening rather than the “objectively existing” and quantitatively measurable sonic phenomena within a given area. The word aural—from *auris*, Latin for “pertaining to the ear” (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.)—in this context shifts the focus from sounds as objects to soundscapes as fields of action where hearing happens. Aural implies that it is not so much the physical sound pressure oscillations as such, or in any combination, that should be understood as “common property,” but the possibility of experiencing and *accessing* (Rifkin 2000; Kytö 2018) a soundscape by hearing it and listening to it (see also Brown 2011; 2012; Brown, Gjestland & Dubois 2016, 5–7, 12).

Framing the acoustic environment from a listener’s perspective rather than through a metaphysically postulated or technologically specified “all-hearing ear” (for example, a sound recorder with an ambisonic microphone setup) resonates with the suggestion of soundscape researcher Barry Truax, who pro-

poses conceiving of the soundscape as “how the individual and society as a whole *understand* the acoustic environment through listening” (Truax 2001, xviii; emphasis in original). Truax’s ideas are fruitful to further foreground the importance of listening in studying soundscapes. He links together the subjective and intersubjective elements of an aural perception and its material and discursive modalities. He depicts soundscapes as environmental relationships: as mutuality and interaction between those who listen and those who are listened to. He also binds together the affective experience of listening and the cognitive and epistemic process of “understanding” a soundscape by attributing meanings to it, thus rendering the aural experience as more-than-personal by linking it to shared cultural codes.

The age of noise, and the quest for silence

The twentieth century is, among other things, the Age of Noise. Physical noise, mental noise and noise of desire—we hold history’s record for all of them. (Huxley 1946, 218)

The right to a quiet acoustic environment is simultaneously a topical issue and something that has been debated over a long period of time. Urban noise was articulated as a societal problem as early as the beginning of the 20th century, followed by various noise abatement campaigns and regulations to tackle the issue (Bijsterveld 2003). In 1946, Aldous Huxley wrote that the 20th century could be labeled the “Age of Noise” (Huxley 1946, 218), and even with countering trends such as the rise of electric traffic, the beginning of the 21st century has not fallen behind in comparison.²

In the 1960s and 1970s, the pollution of the aural commons by unnecessary noise became a vital concern of the emerging acoustic ecology movement. In a little book called *The Ear Cleaning* (1967), one of the movement’s pioneers, R. Murray Schafer, defines noise as “any sound signal which interferes”—as “the destroyer of things we want to hear” (Schafer 1967, 5). This definition is persuasive in its apparent simplicity: noise is something that blocks something else. It is an obstacle to our wishes. The definition is also striking in suggesting that noise cannot be identified by discrete sonic content. Instead, it is to be defined in reference to other sensory experiences to which we attribute value. In other words, noise not only *causes* disturbance but, more precisely, noise *is* disturbance, and what disturbs us is the impossibility of hearing what we would like to hear.

2 Although it must be emphasized that the experience of noise is not a universally shared experience but that the exposure to noise varies remarkably between socio-economic contexts and intersects with aspects of socio-spatial inequality (Méndez & Otero 2018).

This fluid, open-ended, and relational essence of noise partly reveals why urban noise disputes are so difficult to tackle: what in a particular place and time do we “want to hear” and what at a certain moment could “interfere” with that cannot be assessed outside of a specific context. For example, in the early 20th century cities that Karin Bijsterveld has studied, the many technological advancements of that period came in the way of the peaceful and pastoral soundscapes of the past:

The sounds of factories, trains, trams, automobiles, buses, motorcycles, aircraft, telephones, radio, pneumatic drills, steam-hammers, and of thousands of hooters, brakes, mufflers and gear levers, accompanied those of church bells, whips, street musicians, carpet beating, milk cans and yelling people. (Bijsterveld 2003, 182)

While soundscape studies have attempted to steer clear of oversimplified, overgeneralizing, and inadvertently normative conceptions of noise (Brown 2012, 73), the popular debate is still keen to express the value of soundscapes by contrasting their relative quietness to the ubiquitous hum of urban life. Especially in media debates, the actual and existing diversity of the urban acoustic environment is rapidly overshadowed by the binary opposition between the “noise-makers” and “silence advocates” (Ampuja 2007, 189). However, this relation is far from symmetrical. While the opinions of silence advocates may be more prevalent in the letters-to-the-editor sections of media, the noise-makers not only have certain notions of modernity, development, and “normal urban life” (ibid., 233) on their side but also the commercial interests of noise-making businesses. Thus, disagreements are not only differences of aesthetic preference but also dilemmas penetrated by economic and political interests and asymmetrically configured through power relations (e.g. Cardoso 2017).

The silence advocates assert that a city lacks something, a bit paradoxically, the *lack* of disturbing sounds. In this ontology, a peaceful living environment is equaled to relative soundlessness, which is postulated as a sort of normal state of the aural commons. However, at the level of the empirical, the expectations on soundlessness are messily interwoven with subjective and intersubjective valuations.

The meanings given to silence run a wide gamut and can be described as *the polyphony of silence* (Vikman 2006; Venäläinen 2016). There is no single and simple silence that every silence-seeker wishes to hear, but rather, silence speaks in a “multitude of voices” (Greek *poly+phonos*). There is a different “version” of silence for each individual (Cardoso 2009, 2). Sometimes silence is a wish for a certain sound to disappear, while at other times it refers to situations where certain sounds are hoped to be audible. For example, in the “silence of

nature,” human-made sounds are usually understood as a nuisance, whereas *geophonic* and *biophonic* sounds (Gage, Ummadi, Shortridge, Qi & Kumar Jella 2014; Brown, Gjestland & Dubois 2016, 3–4) are naturally expected to be present. However, the notion of natural silence is paradoxical, as nature can sometimes be aggressively noisy (Hendy 2013, 442–473).

Even more commonly, seeking silence is a metaphor for trying to find “peace of mind.” Thus, the range of appreciated and sought-after silences is not confined to acoustic spaces with low sound pressure but varies depending on the subjectively experienced, socio-culturally mediated, and context-dependent encounters between silence-seekers and their environment. Silence is as much metaphorical as it is material. Nevertheless, to conceive of silence as a metaphor is not an attempt to downplay its significance, but quite the opposite. As J. Martin Daughtry writes, metaphors are “theories in miniature, [...] opening small, ephemeral, but at times valuable discursive spaces in which we can think and sense the world anew” (Daughtry 2017, 1135).

Because of the variegated and contextually-bound understandings of noise and silence, noise disputes cannot be fully understood if noise is approached primarily as a quantifiable phenomenon. Noise researcher Valtteri Hongisto, in studying the human experience of wind-farm noise, points out that instead of the measured sound level, the experience of noisiness is sometimes better explained with “various interrogating variables,” including attitudes, expectations, and economic interests (Hongisto 2014, 3). It is reasonable to expect that these “interrogating variables” are not limited to wind-farm noise but are significant in all kinds of noise disputes, particularly those that take place in complex urban dynamics. With this as the starting point, I will now examine an urban noise conflict in Finland to illustrate, first, the empirical realities of (un)managing the aural commons, and second, how the lack of shared practices of commoning complicates the mediation of urban noise disputes.

Fighting the “persistent din” of urban life

Within an aural commons, divergent claims to a shared acoustic space sometimes converge harmoniously and at other times collide dissonantly. Stefan Haag (2002, 115), in writing about the synesthetic elements in the tenth episode of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, describes aural commons as “a life-like acoustic space, where people interact and on occasion intrude, deliberately and accidentally, into one another’s space.” This interaction can be peaceful, and for the most part it must be (for the quotidian sociability to be possible at all). Nevertheless, every now and then these “intrusions” escalate into open conflicts where no pre-existing codes of conduct give easy answers to the dilemmas of managing the commons.

Haag observes that the boundaries between private and public soundscapes are “frail or permeable,” a reason why aural commons are always prone to unforeseeable events and tensions (Haag 2002, 115). Similarly, ethnomusicologist Meri Kytö (2011, 116) stresses how the *acoustic order* of urban dwelling is not only about following common rules but also about creating and negotiating these rules. In studying the acoustic dimensions of “modern citizenship” in a large housing company in Istanbul, she refuses to assume that an urban soundscape would be either private or common in its original state, instead arguing that urban soundscapes are constituted as common or private by locally shaped residential practices (ibid., 117.)

Apart from neighborly relations within apartment buildings, one of the arenas where boundaries between public and private soundscapes are repeatedly crossed is urban nightlife in residential areas. When two aurally different functions of the city—sleeping and partying—take place in the same neighborhoods, on the same blocks, or even in the same building, the delicate balance of acoustic order easily collapses (see Kytö & Hytönen-Ng 2015), and the cultural expectations of residential soundscapes (Kytö 2016) are not met.

In March 2016, *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest subscription newspaper in Finland, reported that “the residents want to silence *Bones*,” a multi-story night spot and restaurant in the upscale neighborhood of Punavuori, Helsinki (Laitinen 2016; all following quotations translated from Finnish). According to the article, the “persistent din” caused by the music played in the restaurant disturbs the residents living in the same building above the restaurant. Therefore, the residents have written a letter to the municipal environmental committee and requested the restaurant to cease playing music at night.

What type of business was *Bones* at the time of the dispute? The article does not say much about the matter, but instead, introduces the case by situating it against the wider backdrop of noise disputes in Helsinki. The opening paragraph reveals that only one month earlier, another restaurant, *Helmi*, which had operated for 20 years, closed because it could not afford a renovation to improve noise insulation. Then, two paragraphs later, the article mentions that both *Bones* and *Helmi* were open until 4 AM on Fridays and Saturdays. A quote from the decision of the municipal environmental committee mentions a DJ playing at ground level and demand from local residents to prohibit the music played in an underground night club. *Bones* was housed in a multi-story structure with different musical activities at different levels and residential apartments above. Apart from auditory pleasures, the reviews currently accessible in Tripadvisor (Tripadvisor n.d.) reveal that Tres Bones Oy also served lunch and dinner, such as “slow cooker pork with coconut for 18€ and Massam chicken for 16€.”

Kaupunki

Asukkaat haluavat hiljentää Bonesin

Ravintolalle on annettu aikaa äänentasojen pienentämiseen kesäkuun alkuun saakka.



(KUVA: JUHANI NIIRANEN HS)

Joonas Laitinen HS
Julkaistu: 3.3.2016 2:00



A screenshot of the news article about the noise dispute around Tres Bones Oy. Heading: "Residents want to silence Bones." Lead: "The business has been given until the beginning of June to lower its sound volume." *Helsingin Sanomat*, 3 March 2016.

Structurally, the article in *Helsingin Sanomat* is relatively balanced in that it describes the noise dispute from two opposing views: the view of the business-owner and the view of the neighbors. After presenting a few quick facts about the case, the article provides the residents' opinion first, quoting from the complaint that the residents had filed with the municipal environmental committee:

"During the two years of its operation, more than 200 complaints were filed against Tres Bones Oy for the nocturnal noise disturbances caused by music. The owner of the business talks about soundproofing, adjustments, and frequencies, but the problem itself has not been touched," states the residents' complaint to the municipal environmental committee. (Laitinen 2016.)

Next, the view of management, which speaks in an impersonal voice ("the business"³). The article is not based on interviews but on the documents retrieved from the environmental committee. In the argumentation quoted in the article, Tres Bones Oy denies accusations of not taking complaints serious-

3 The Finnish word used here is *ravintola* which literally translated to "restaurant" but has a wider range of meanings than the English equivalent.

ly, denies that the noise disturbance has worsened, and explains that several renovations had already been done, and more were planned to improve the situation. However, the bottom line of the argument was that the residents' demand to silence the music was "unreasonable":

According to the business, the residents' demands and the imposition of a fine would be unreasonable for the business. "The demand to not play music between 22–3.30 is unreasonable because of the harm that would be caused to nightly sales," writes the business management in its statement to the environmental committee. (Laitinen 2016.)

Two sharply contrasting ways of using the nocturnal urban soundscape come to the fore in this context: one that requires a relatively peaceful acoustic environment (for sleeping) and another that requires relatively loud music to create broad sensory and bodily experiences (clubbing). The argumentation draws from different rhetorical devices to fine-tune the framing of how the conflicting objectives are compared. The residents refer to the number of complaints as suggestive evidence of the unbearableness of the situation. In contrast, the business's spokesperson lists several measures ("a new sound system," "an acoustical mat," "a soundproof ceiling") to assure residents that the business has already put considerable effort into improving the situation and meeting legal requirements. Indeed, both sides claim to have acted reasonably, while it is precisely their different notions of "reasonableness" that are at stake and in conflict.

The argumentation in the concluding part of the article is written in very technical parlance, reporting the results of sound level measurements conducted in the apartments. As the long list of decibel figures is perhaps expected to be too abstract for the average reader, the article helps the reader by metaphorically comparing the measured decibel levels to the sound of a ticking watch, a whisper, and a quiet office:

In the measurements conducted in three bedrooms at Iso-Roobertinkatu 13, the average sound level carried from the restaurant was 22–27 decibels. The maximum sound level carried to the apartments was 35–40 decibels [...] In the two measurements in the bedrooms at Annankatu 2, the average level was 22–29 decibels. [...] Just to compare, the ticking of a watch equals about 20 decibels, a whisper 30–40 decibels, and the sound from a quiet office about 40 decibels. [...]. (Laitinen 2016)

It is important to note how the suddenly appearing decibel figures serve as evidence that can be used—and must be used—by the authorities in de-

termining how to interpret and solve the conflict. The cited decibels are taken directly from the minutes of the meeting of the environmental committee (HEL 2016-001877) that had decided on the matter the day before the article was published. While the minutes reveal that “sensory observation” along with decibel measurements were used to assess sound leakage, it was ultimately quantitative rather than qualitative data that end up representing the hard facts of the case; decibels were used to express the magnitude of the problem. As Karen Bijsterveld (2003, 176) notes, already after the invention of the “decibel” as a measure of loudness in 1925, it became increasingly equated with the assessment of “how bad” a noise situation is.

As described in the article, the environmental committee decided to impose a fine of 15,000 euros if the restaurant did not resolve the noise problem within three months. While the article continuously uses the term “noise disturbance,” the decision text of the environmental committee refers to a “condition [...] that is a health hazard”—a legal term that provides the public authorities with the powers to intervene:

On the grounds of the sensory observations and measurements conducted by the Environmental Center, the Environmental Committee decided that a certain condition in the apartments at Iso-Roobertinkatu 13 and Annankatu 6 is a health hazard as defined in 1 § and 26 § of the Health Protection Law. (HEL 2016-001877; translated here)

Disputes about restaurant noise are not uncommon in Helsinki, if in any capital city. Ten cases were found between 2013 and 2019 in the online document archive of the environmental committee, where a conditional fine was imposed on a restaurant that had received noise complaints from nearby residents. In eight of the cases, the reported reason was referred to as a “music noise disturbance.” Most of the restaurants in question were situated in a small area within the Punavuori and Kamppi districts, seven of them within one kilometer from each other.

In the two cases where music is not mentioned as a disturbance, the sounds considered as disturbing were “speaking voices,” “slamming noises,” “hum from the air conditioner,” “the sound of water running from the tap,” “sound of closing doors,” “footsteps from the staircase,” “the clatter of dishes,” and “conversation.” The non-musical noises are described in the documents in much more detail than the “music noise” complaint, which was, for the most part, expressed only in decibels based on measurements conducted in apartments above.

The kind of music that was considered disturbing is rarely described in the documents, which means that it is of no importance, or of secondary impor-

tance, in resolving noise disputes. While the environmental committee had to ground its decision on the legal framework of noise abatement (especially, the Health Protection Act), neglecting the importance of aesthetic valuation obscures the characteristics of the perceived disturbance and reduces the debate to a technical description of sound volume only. The public reviews of *Bones* (although of course potentially written by members of the staff) give a different impression. The reviews do not mention the volume of the music once, but the quality and the relation of the music to creating a good atmosphere are mentioned many times:

Downstairs you find yourself in an amazingly outfitted sound cave with a bar. Very interesting place to chill or dance to minimal techno thanks to a great and passionate DJ. (Tripadvisor n.d.)

Love the atmosphere, very nice staff, very nice bouncers, very cool drinks, e.g. Hawaiian beer, the best Mojito in town, etc. Nice dance floor with different DJs and cool people. (Tripadvisor n.d.)

As a representation of and a contribution to the *Bones* case, the article in *Helsingin Sanomat* can be summarized as follows: The article readily accepted the framing of the dispute given by the public authorities. This is exemplified by directly using figures and quotations from the minutes of the environmental committee and, more generally, in how the dispute is represented as a conflict between a business-owner and residents. This completely neglects the perspective of the restaurants' customers and the economic benefit gained by the housing company (and indirectly, the company's residents) in the form of rent or maintenance charge paid by the restaurant. Thus, the impression of the underlying socio-economic and socio-cultural dynamics is highly polarized: the only validation registers (Cardoso 2019) considered for assessing the conflict were the noise abatement regulations and the commercial interests of the restaurant. Of these two, the noise abatement register is more prominent and finally assumes a very specific form in the discussed article. To debate noise as a "disturbance," the article employs a range of technical parlance from the planned noise insulation renovations to the results of sound level measurements.

As Leonardo Cardoso (2019, 214) mentions, noise litigation is complex "not only because of its techno-scientific peculiarities but because the issue permeates different legal fields." Noise abatement in Finland as a regulatory focus has been developing since the 1960s (Ampuja 2007, 228). In 2014, the separate Noise Abatement Act was integrated into the new Environmental

Protection Act. However, plenty of regulations remain that guide public authorities in mitigating harmful noise (Table 1).

National level (legislation, governmental decrees and guidelines)	Local level (orders given by the municipality)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Protection Act (2014) • Environmental Protection Decree (2014) • Government Decision on Guideline Values for Noise Levels (1992) • Ministry of Social Affairs and Health's Decree on the Healthful Conditions of Apartment [...] (545/2015) • Land Use and Building Act (1999) • Health Protection Act (1994) • Adjoining Properties Act (1920) • Government Decision on Finland's National Land Use Guidelines (2017) • National Building Codes (e.g., Ministry of Environment's Decree on the Sound Environment of Buildings, 2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipal building codes • Municipal environmental protection regulations (e.g., Helsinki Environmental Protection Guidelines, 2018) • Municipal and regional planning ordinances

Table 1. Regulatory sources of noise abatement in Finland. Compiled from Airola 2013; Ministry of the Environment 2017.

The article on *Bones* does not go deep into explaining the regulation but implicitly affirms that environmental professionals have the required knowledge, responsibility, and powers to resolve the dispute. With regard to *aural commons*, the picture painted by the article is pessimistic: there is no community to come together to discuss the use of the shared acoustic space. Instead, there are three groups of people—residents, restaurant-owners, and restaurant-goers—whose life-worlds are portrayed as entirely separate. This gives the impression that their conflicting activities only accidentally occurred at the same place and time. Also, the latter of the three groups is almost completely ignored in the coverage. Despite that the article describes how the opposing sides of the conflict only communicate indirectly through the administrative process monitored by the environmental committee, the article accepts the strongly individualistic view that “people do not consider themselves in an acoustic relation with each other” (Ampuja 2007, 192). This view is not to be seen so much as a journalistic intention but as a reflection of a more persistent ontology codified in the regulatory logic of noise abatement.

The problem of *not-commoning*

The *Bones* case is not exceptional; it reflects the typical tensions and oft-heard dynamics of co-inhabiting an urban soundscape. First, there are conflicting objectives, such as the residents' wish for a peaceful acoustic environment during the night, and the restaurant's aim of attracting clubbers with relatively loud music. Then, there are different lifestyle preferences, such as the value given to undisturbed sleep by the residents, and the value given to nightlife by clubbers. These objectives and valuations were not negotiated between the "users" of the shared acoustic space, but rather, the arguments were depersonalized, externalized, objectified, polarized, and finally communicated in the form of letters and documents to an administrative body, or through media. When the arguments were finally weighed, a much narrower and much more straightforward conception of noise as a physical phenomenon with detrimental health effects was advocated more than the auditory experience of disturbance.

Social historian Peter Linebaugh (2008, 79) notes that the word "common" was not originally used as a noun to refer to a pool of resources but as a verb: *to common*. Producing and experiencing the soundscapes that we share can similarly be understood as moments of commoning. In a fundamental sense, commoning is about trying to cope with inevitable coexistence and inevitably shared duties (*com-munus*, the latter part of which is Latin for "duty" or "obligation"). As Cardoso (2019, 247) writes, "[s]ound is sound-politics to the extent that it gets entangled with the inevitable challenge of cohabitation." This challenge can be more than just coping; it can be determined and purposeful efforts to produce new commons and preserve the sustainability of existing ones.

The aspect of commoning in the *Bones* example is either lacking altogether or concealed behind the regulatory process. With legally mandated professional intervention, the notion of noise shifts from being "any sound signal which interferes" (Schafer 1967) to a very particular, delimited, and seemingly objective phenomenon: a documented moment of sound pressure exceeding a prescribed threshold level as measured with a specific technical protocol. However, the problem for commoning is not in measurement, quantification, or "numbers" as such but in an overly narrow conception of what is to be measured and quantified, and how (Latour 2009; Latour & Lépinay 2009). Detaching the regulatory process from the common sensemaking is a particular "tragedy of the aural commons,"—something that is not so much distinguished by the overexploitation of the soundscape but by the same issue that haunted Garrett Hardin's original example, i.e. having commonly harnessed resources without a sense and dynamics of togetherness; of having a "commons without a community" (Mies 2014).

Conclusions

Are urban soundscapes prone to a tragedy of the commons as increasing unsolicited noise threatens the ecologies of silence? A key problem with the urban aural commons, as exemplified with the *Bones* case, is that aural commons are sort of “accidental” commons from the perspective of socio-cultural practices: they are not recognized as “common duties” (*com-munus*), and consequently, they lack the living practices of commoning (De Angelis 2017, 122) that would facilitate the tedious task of elaborating, mediating, and conciliating different expectations on how to manage a shared acoustic environment. Thus, to promote good neighborly relations and fruitful commoning, *sonic* space and *sonic* practices should be accompanied by correlating *social* space and *social* practices for aural commons. This would include both the concrete moments of dealing with things together—the “plural activity of doing,” as De Angelis puts it—and the appropriate fora for collectively setting objectives and making decisions (*ibid.*).

The polarized debate on urban noise does not promise quick solutions. In the current *modus operandi* of urban sound disputes, the abstract and technical approach that presumes a commensurable understanding of noise while not giving much leeway for collective debate on its content, appears almost as an antithesis of commoning; it externalizes and objectifies a problem that is essentially “internal” (that is, exists within a group of people who share the same space) and intersubjective. When noise disputes end up in administrative processes, they are translated into a discourse that largely neglects the polyphonies of noise and silence and the socio-cultural and political dynamics related to them. Privileging decibel measurements as the evidence of noise nuisance contributes to what Karin Bijsterveld (2008) describes as a *paradox of control* in noise abatement; some of the perceived noise problems that are not quantifiable lack regulatory intervention, whereas others are quantified at a very abstracted level, “in formulas beyond citizens’ reach” (*ibid.*, 2, 253, 258). Thus, as in *Bones*, arbitrating noise conflicts through a distanced and technical discourse conceals rather than reveals their nuanced dynamics.

If the current state of noise abatement resembles an “aural commons without an aural community,” a partly overmanaged and partly undermanaged regime, why then is the continuous disquiet over urban noise not a simple example of a “tragedy of the commons”? Because there is one major difference. Despite that Garrett Hardin assumed a highly individualistic social ontology in his reasoning, there was also something that he saw as shared by individuals: the loss that would bring “ruin to *all*” (emphasis added). However, it is far from evident in noise conflicts that a particular constellation of sounds

would bring “ruin to all.” Instead, a given noise might be a nuisance for one person but a pleasure for another.

In this article, I have argued that we should shift focus in noise disputes from sounds as objects to sounds as a way of being together (similarly, see Feld 1994; 2003, 226), i.e. understanding and managing urban soundscapes as aural commons. While the current organization of noise abatement shows little regard for fostering a common space for *living together with sound*, there are no compelling reasons to believe that urban dwellers would be inherently incapable of or intentionally indifferent to hearing the wishes of others. Thus, I maintain that the notion of aural commons, instead of the plain “soundscape,” would better depict the acoustic environment as a dynamic field of action that is entangled with social, cultural, and political processes. The point of emphasizing these processes of commoning is not to claim that they would ever reach a harmonious equilibrium but to propose them as continuously reshaped practices of sense-making and rule-shaping. Karin Bijsterveld (2008, 259) argues that we should develop standards that are closer to the everyday experiences of citizens to achieve successful noise abatement. From a commons’ perspective, it should be added that “we” should not only comprise expert opinions but also those of *commoners* and their grassroots forms of organization.

Even if the practical way forward through the mishmash of urban sound governance proves tricky, approaching soundscapes as commons can be understood as a “performative ontological project” (Gibson-Graham 2008). Framing the issue differently opens up new paths for political imagination. Understanding soundscapes as commons perturbs the prevailing notion of sensing as a double-sided relationship between the sensing individual and the sensed exterior. This also implies that sensations are not, and cannot be, the private property of anyone, but rather sensations are constitutive of the sensing subject, who is always on the way to becoming an “individual” (Simondon 1989; Combes 2013). Ontologically, this portrays the sensory faculties as elementarily shared; epistemologically, this approaches sensing as a collaborative process; and ethically, this focuses on dealing with the inevitable coexistence of diverging valuations of sensory phenomena.

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