

RETHINKING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IN AN ACOUSTIC COMMUNITY: INVESTIGATION OF CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN VILLAGE. *Summary*

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This article reconstructs the specifics of how public spaces are distinguished from private in a present-day rural community by studying its “acoustic landscape,” also known as soundscape, with a particular focus on definitions of the concept that emphasize the function of sounds within a community. Given the experimental nature of this approach, I also reflect on the opportunities offered and problems posed by this method.

The material for this article was collected over 15 years while I carried out two comprehensive research projects in a village in the Northwestern region of Russia. The village has a little over 300 permanent residents. Prior to the 2000s, a state-owned animal farm operated here. The village has every vital element of social infrastructure: a school, a kindergarten, a rural health post, two stores, a local council, a club, a library, and a church.

The first project took place between 2002 and 2005;¹ the second, between 2009 and 2010.² Both involved ethnographic observation of everyday life as an essential method. These observations were complemented by interviews; these are not quoted in the present article but were used as passive empirical data. Naturally, the emphasis on observing sounds gave the study an element of autoethnography, as the researcher turned out to be the main subject noticing and recording sounds.

The theoretical section of the article discusses the opportunities that the concept of soundscape offers for studying the division between the public and the private. I chose this concept as my principal methodological instrument because of the communicative understanding of background noises implicit in the original interpre-

¹ This research project was titled “Vdali ot gorodov: Zhizn’ vostochno-evropeiskogo sela. Der-evskie zhiznennye miry v Rossii, Estonii i Bolgarii” (Faraway from Cities: Life in Eastern European Villages. Rural Life Worlds in Russia, Estonia, and Bulgaria); it was a joint project with the University of Magdeburg, supported by Deutsche Forschungsgesellschaft.

² This research project was titled “Sotsial’naia infrastruktura sovremennoi rossiiskoi derevni: Printsipy organizatsii i vozmozhnosti razvitiia” (Social Infrastructure of the Modern Russian Village: Rules of Working and Problems of Development) and was supported by the Institution of Social Projecting, Russia.

tation of soundscape. Background sounds fill one's daily life and are capable of broadcasting socially significant information at a distance. In the countryside sounds play a special role. In contrast to the city, the countryside is noise free. According to R. Murray Schafer, an urban soundscape is a polluted, so-called lo-fi acoustic environment, where sound signals are barely perceptible through background noise. To the contrary, a rural soundscape is a hi-fi soundscape, wherein individual sounds are clearly discernible due to the low level of noise pollution.

If rural space is acoustically transparent and sounds are capable of serving as signals—that is, they transmit socially significant information—then a study of background noises is key to learning the rules of a rural community's social organization. As the soundscape concept is applied to the study of public and private in the contemporary Russian countryside, the following questions arise: What happens to the division between the public and the private in the country? Does a sound coming from a private home remain private, or does it become public? Can the dichotomy of public and private be applied to rural communities at all?

Soundscape studies are deeply contextual. The size of the community, its population density, and the type of housing, along with many other factors, immediately impact the potential of the acoustic environment and the ability of background noises to convey socially meaningful information. The context of this study and the set of sounds I observed are typical of the Russian northwestern countryside: this must be taken into consideration when generalizing this study's findings and attempting similar studies elsewhere.

The history of the village's real estate development clearly demonstrates the tension between the efforts of the state and local residents' preferences. The types of housing and the history of their construction reflect the fundamental nature of state-run industrialization and urbanization aimed at turning peasants into city dwellers. Any attempt to make rural residents live in an urban type of collective housing is invariably bound to a transplantation of urban notions of privacy. The entire history of subsequent development testifies to the complete failure of the project and to the village's steady return to individual housing.

The location and organization of the newest houses in the village make evident the preferences of present-day villagers, now freed from the restrictions of state-sponsored projects. In the absence of external interference they reproduce the model of the single-family detached home, spatially distant from the neighbors. The arrangement of the house and its adjacent spaces is adapted so as to satisfy a modern rural family's needs in terms of agricultural production, storage for motorized transport and farm machinery, seasonal storage, childcare, and entertainment. The greater distance of the newest buildings from the main built-up area of the village attests to the families' greater need for privacy and protection not only from their neighbors' eyes but also their ears.

My analysis of the village's background sounds confirmed that this is an acoustically transparent space. Background noises serve as a timekeeper, marking daily and seasonal cycles, weekdays and holidays. For local residents background noises coming in from the street are a reference point helping them to structure their own daily

and seasonal activities and to coordinate them with those of their neighbors. Sound is an important tool for developing a family's reputation; sounds serve as sources of information on the goings-on in the village. Sounds form a single frame of reference, structured in time and space and shared by all the locals: the intimate knowledge provided by these sounds serves community members as an additional identifier helping to distinguish friends from foes. Lately, the "commonplaces" of the acoustic landscape have been shifting from the sphere of labor and animal care to the sphere of leisure and new practices, for instance, those related to church.

The range of sounds determines the special atmosphere of a rural home and distinguishes it from its urban counterpart. The differences are, nevertheless, blurring along with the greater modernization of daily life. A rural home does not block incoming sounds—it is transparent to street noises. By way of sounds coming in from the street and serving as signals, a villager is inscribed in the general acoustic matrix of the village and linked to the many events happening outside of the home. In this sense, it is as if the space of the street invades that of the home. A rural home does not fully block outgoing sounds either: domestic life in the country produces enough sounds that are easily overheard by the nearest neighbors. Apartment walls in multi-unit buildings are too thin to conceal the minutiae of neighbors' private lives.

This study demonstrates that acoustic information is a very important source of sociological data on life in rural communities. In an acoustic community there is a special way of achieving balance between the public and the private—it is one of the principal systems structuring individual lives and coordinating the life of the community as a whole. The acoustic transparency of rural space sets the rules dividing the public from the private within the village that are completely different from the rules of the city. These rules also distinguish the "microclimate" of the village from the outside world. Privacy requires leaving spaces between dwellings; however, the prevailing type of modern rural housing does not allow for that. A contemporary Russian village is, in a sense, an artificial entity formed under pressure of a large number of state interventions aimed at enlarging rural settlements and increasing their density.

In the country, public and private spaces are not as clearly separated as in the city. Here the dense social fabric of the community and the salient communicative functionality of the acoustic environment produce a lack of privacy, while at the same time curtailing publicity. Depending on the situation, the same space may be either private or public. The acoustic community of the Russian village prescribes special conventions that help locals differentiate the public from the private and provide them with the means of switching between these two modes. Socialization in the rural community teaches one to hear and interpret the sounds according to these conventions.

Authorized translation from Russian by Elena Lemeneva