Cécile de Morrée

Devout sisters' aural experiences in the late medieval urban sonic environment

Soundscaping the functional context of oral literature

In the Augustinian convent of Diepenveen in the North-Eastern Low Countries, sister Trude van Beveren was notorious for her disturbing voice. Because of her vocal incapacities, she was not allowed to participate in the choir singing during mass and office, with the exception of the nocturnals. On these occasions, she sang with such enthusiasm and volume that she was clearly audible above the whole choir. This was kindly endured by her fellow sisters, because of Trude's great devotion.[1] Because of her vocal limitations, combined with the convent's lack of means, Trude was not allowed any paper for writing down songs. Whereas the other sisters had materials to take notes and produce their own song books, Trude could only make temporary notes on a slate. It was not until intervention by the procuratrix of the convent that Trude received paper to write 'her choir books and whatever she needed'.[2] This story is both amusing and meaningful. The impact of Trude's voice on the convent's sound world did not only cause a nuisance in devotional activity, it also resulted in adaptation of the rules that governed the rhythm of community life: Trude was partially discharged from her monastic obligations and excluded from active participation in most services. Moreover, she was not granted equal possibilities to her fellow sisters to write down, preserve and transmit texts and songs.

¶ Cécile de Morrée (Utrecht University) currently works on the functionality of Middle Dutch devout song collections, one of the most extensive of which was in the possession of the Sisters of the Common Life in Zwolle. Her work is part of the NWO/FWO financed research project 'In Tune with Eternity: Song and Spirituality of the Modern Devotion'.

[1] 'Sie en hadden geen guede choer stemme, als dat sie niet over een en droech mytten anderen susteren. Soe en moste sie des daghes niet buten mondes lesen, mer des nachtes wast hoer geoerloft. Dan plach sie soe vurichlike te lesen, dat men sie wt al den susteren hoerde. Ende die susteren leden hem daer guetlick in om hore goddiensticheit willen.' Brinkerink 1904:191-192.

[2] 'Het was hijr doe noch soe arm, dat sie geen guet gerack van pappijr en conden gecrijgen. Ende ock want sie gene guede stemme en hadde den choer te helpen, soe en waert hoer niet gegeven als den anderen. Soe nam die oetmodige ziele leyen, daer sie hoer dinghe op schref, dat sie inden choer lesen solde. Ende dat was een seer pijnlick dinck, omme dat siet vaker vernyen moste wantet vaeke anders ende anders was datmen lesen solde. (...) Ende suster elsebe hasenbroeck waert procratersch. Die vragede doe onsen vader iohan, of sie den susteren wal genoech pappijrs geven mochte. Doe segede hij: "ya"; doe gaf sij suster truyden ende al den susteren soe voel als sies behoefden. Doe was suster truyde blijde ende schreef doe hoer choer boeken ende wes sie behovede.' Brinkerink 1904:192-193. See also Scheepsma 1997:63.

Ons Geestelijk Erf 86(3), 159-177. doi: 10.2143/OGE.86.3.3154600
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As shown by another anecdote about Trude van Beveren, the Augustinian sisters were by no means deaf to their sonic surroundings. Once, as Trude was fetching water, an appropriate chant came into her mind: *Haurietis aquas in gaudio de fontibus salvatoris* (Jes. 12:3-4a). As a result, she completely lost touch with the present as she fiercely continued drawing water from the well. Although sources do not mention what exactly triggered this mental change, sound was probably part of it, since it is a distinct aspect of both water and song. The sound of the sloshing water in the convent's well fit in with the metaphoric wells of salvation, and intensified the significance of the lyrics to an extent as to bring Trude into a state of trance.[3] As opposed to the former, in this story aural experiences did not impede devotion, but enhanced it. These examples give way to wondering whether understanding the sisters' sound world is a crucial step towards understanding their production and use of songs and song books.

The significance of texts, sermons, songs and silence to convents of adherents of the Devotio Moderna has received a great deal of scholarly attention. It was observed that these convents, although mostly stemming from the same reform movement, differed in shape. The female branch included sisters in devout communities, Sisters of the Common Life, Sisters of the 3rd order of St.-Francis, Conversae of St.-Augustine and Augustinian Canonesses – all varying in daily practice.[4] Life in convents belonging to the Chapter of Windesheim was not static either, for the Chapter's Constitution was revised regularly and actual practical uses varied.[5] Even so, communal life was generally governed by strict rules of maintaining silence.[6]

There has been much debate about the nature of this silence: should we think of it as the absence of sound production, or can the rule be interpreted as a measure to banish anything that might interfere with the pursuit of internal devotion? In my opinion, the latter is more probable, as sources indicate that talking was allowed when concerning practical or religious matters. Also, the adherents of the Devotio Moderna are well known for their active consumption of texts: they were continuously repeating and murmuring lines to enhance their internal devotion. In this process, all concentration was directed inward, yet the action was not necessarily deprived of sound.[7] There are more indications

[3] 'Op een tijt soe stont sie ende puttede; doe quam hoer een vers in, dat sie des nachtes in der noctornen gelesen hadde dat was: "Gy sult die wateren in blijschappen putten wt den fonteynen des gesontmakers. Ende gy sult seggen inden dagen: Belyet den heren ende anroepet sinen namen." Daer was sie soe vurich mede, dat sie byna alle den arbeyt vergat ende puttede soe vurichlike, dat sie nauwe en wiste wat sij dede.' Brinkerink 1904:193-194. See also Hascher-Burger 2008a:153, Joldersma 2008:387, Scheepsma 1997:54.

[4] Mertens 2013:134-136.

[5] Van Dijk 1986, I:25-35, 42-45.

[6] Van Dijk 1986, I:429-436, 498, 515-523, De Man 1919:XXVII-XXVIII.

[7] This is a.o. discussed by Hascher-Burger 1998:256-258, Joldersma 2008:377-378 and Van der Poel 2011:74-75. Relevant source material can be found in De Man 1919:190-191 for the Sisters of the Common Life in Deventer, and in Van Dijk 1986, I:515-517 and II:647-

that the experience of sound and silence in religious communities was not monolithic. The Devotio Moderna originated as an urban movement, the communities of its adherents were usually situated within city walls, and there existed dynamic relations between the brothers and sisters and their fellow urban citizens.[8] The abundance and variety of the sonic environment in medieval cities in the Low Countries was already pointed out by Strohm in relation to Bruges.[9] The direct neighbourhoods around the houses that were so much governed by silence – or so it is presumed – were actually full of sound.

The experience of sound and silence must have had its impact on the sisters' community and their singing, reading and writing practices, as is illustrated by the examples of Trude van Beveren. Since medieval literature was mostly consumed by listening, the environment in which this aural perception took place is worth considering. While visual perception through reading text on white pages enables us to shut out other visual stimuli, aural perception always occurs by listening to a sonic environment in its entirety. Even when listening attentively to a specific sound, song or read-aloud text, background sounds blend in and influence the performance and the experience of it. Because literature and song were perceived aurally, we should seek research methods that do not limit themselves to visual means of perception. My exploration of the influence of the urban sonic environment on the aural experiences of devout sisters can be considered a tentative effort towards this change of paradigm.

Among these urban influences were the regular parish church visits. Although convents differed from one another in this respect, most communities of Sisters of the Common Life did not have their own chapel, nor were the sisters allowed to hear mass in their own house. Since they did not belong to any officially approved monastic order, they were subject to secular law and, like all parish citizens, obliged to attend religious celebrations in the parish church on Sundays and feast days.[10] The city of Zwolle in the Eastern Low Countries may serve

648, 801-803, 816-817 for the Augustinian and lay sisters of the Chapters of Windesheim and Venlo. An interesting context for the definition problem of silence is provided by Paul Gehls article on monastic silence in Latin Christendom from the sixth to the twelfth century, in which he argues that silence served to measure one's spiritual progress. In this practice, silence is first and foremost considered an attitude of internal attentiveness, that is maintained not only by refraining from speech in certain locations and activities, but that also accompanies audible speech acts such as liturgy, psalmody, refectory readings and studying. Common prayer or singing in particular is considered such a wordy silence, for it unifies all in one voice and in doing so it expels all noise (Gehl 1987:134-138).

[8] Rehm 1985:98-99, Van Luijk 2003:91-102, 173-182.

[9] Strohm 1985, *Introduction*. Strohm did not anticipate an actual connection between literature and its sonic environment, nor did he aim to do so.

[10] Kuys 2006a:29-41; Kuys 2004:68; Bijsterveld 2000-2001:93. The obligatory character of the Sunday masses and the compelling role of sound are fittingly illustrated by a sixteenth-century record of a Londoner who purposely left town every Sunday and was put in a belfry by means of penance (Bruce R. Smith 1999:60). Over the course of the 15th century many communities adopted the rule of Saint Augustine or the Third rule of Saint Francis and in time acquired a private chapel, which allowed the inhabitants to remain inside the convent walls.

as an interesting, well-documented example. Zwolle, situated in the IJsselstreek, at the heart of the Devotio Moderna's origins, enclosed within its walls no less than five communities of Sisters of the Common Life, all founded around 1400.[11] Yet it was not until 1501 that they were all detached from the parish and allowed to hear mass in their own houses.[12] It took a century-long struggle with the parish and the city council, which is remarkably long compared to other cities. Supposedly this exceptional situation was related to the numerous close family ties between sisters and members of the urban magistrate.[13] Be that as it may, the compulsory parish church visits must have been of considerable influence on the sisters' daily lives, forcing them to physically step out of their strict community while still obliged to maintain their inward spiritual concentration.

Seeking out for methods that shed new light on the role of sound and silence in and around devout convents, I will in this article limit myself to reconstructing one of the most intense and varied experiences in the sisters' daily lives with regard to sound: the parish church visits. I will attempt such a reconstruction by combining sound studies with historical sources, a method derived from the field of sensory and aural history. The result will be a so-called soundscape: a representation of the events that could be heard when visiting a fifteenth-century parish church like the one frequented by the Sisters of the Common Life in Zwolle. This will demonstrate that there were actually lots of sounds present in and around life in silence-governed communities, which may also lead to an adjustment of our ideas on silence. I will conclude with some observations about the impact of the parish church's sonic environment on the way the sisters experienced these visits in particular and their daily surroundings in general, as well as some remarks on the suitability of the soundscape as a research tool. I will also offer a potential strand for this approach to be beneficial to research on the functionality of oral literature in religious communities, with particular attention for a large manuscript collection of vernacular songs that in all probability originated from the St.-Cecilia convent of Sisters of the Common Life in Zwolle: the codex Berlin mgo 185.[14]

Aural history

Aural history is part of the research field of sensory history. This field is based on the idea that the way in which we gather information from our senses is a product of place and time: what our senses actually perceive is biologically

[11] Van Luijk 2003:15, 33.
[12] Van Luijk 2003:120-128; Wormgoor 2007:195. Most of the relevant documents are in print, see Berkenvelder 1980-1997, nrs. 2100, 2105, 2124, 3315, 3342.
[13] Van Luijk 2003:257.
[14] De Morrée 2013. The manuscript's full signature is: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, manuscripta germanica in octavo 185.

determined, but the way in which we interpret this information is culturally determined. Sensory experience thus changes over the course of history.[15] Aural history also makes use of sound studies. This field considers sound to be not only a cultural act, but also a social phenomenon, that connects our human selves to the outer world and contributes to the way in which we understand it.[16] One of the concepts most important to aural history, and particularly relevant to the current article, is that of soundscapes. The term 'soundscape' was first used by Schäfer in 1977, who derived it from 'landscape', thus referring to a reconstruction of events heard instead of seen. Whereas the collective of all sound present in any coordinate in space and time is referred to as the sonic environment of that given context, the term 'soundscape' emphasizes how that environment is perceived by those living within it.[17]

Every soundscape consists of three different types of sound layers, referred to as keynote sounds, signals and soundmarks. These are determined by the significance attributed to them by the listener. Keynote sounds form the fundamentals of a soundscape. As in musical compositions, they set the key for the entire piece. Keynote sounds usually are products of climate, flora and fauna, such as the rustling of leaves in the wind and the footsteps of humans and animals. They are heard unconsciously and often become listening habits, or are perceived as background sounds. Signals, the second type of sound layer, are foreground sounds. Signals are listened to consciously, and they are usually meaningful to communication. Examples may include human speech – or chanting or singing – or an ambulance siren. Interestingly, since any sound can be listened to consciously, every sound can become a signal (or a keynote sound, by *not* focusing on it). Finally, the term 'soundmark' refers to a sound that is either unique or specifically noticed by people in a certain community. Examples may include the volcano rumblings that are specific to a certain area, a particular church bell or the announcements that can be heard at train stations.[18]

The idea that aural experiences – soundscapes – change over the course of history becomes apparent when comparing the sonic environments of modern-day western societies to those of the pre-industrialized world. Here, two differences stand out. First, in contemporary urbanized environments, the omnipresent sounds of traffic and electrical devices create a continuous masking effect that was absent in pre-industrialized societies. Cars and air conditioners, for instance, produce a noise that reduces the variety of sounds that can be heard. Second, except for an occasional thunderclap or canon fire, in pre-industrialized societies no sounds louder than 70 dB were produced. This means that the loudest sounds in fifteenth-century daily life were as loud as, for instance, barking

[15] Mark M. Smith 2007:3-4.
[16] Kelman 2010:215. For an example, see note 20 below.
[17] Schäfer 1977:9; Truax 2001:11; see also Kelman 2010 for a discussion of ways of misuse of the term.
[18] Schäfer 1977:9-10, 26, 239-240. See also Truax 2001:24-27, 66-69.

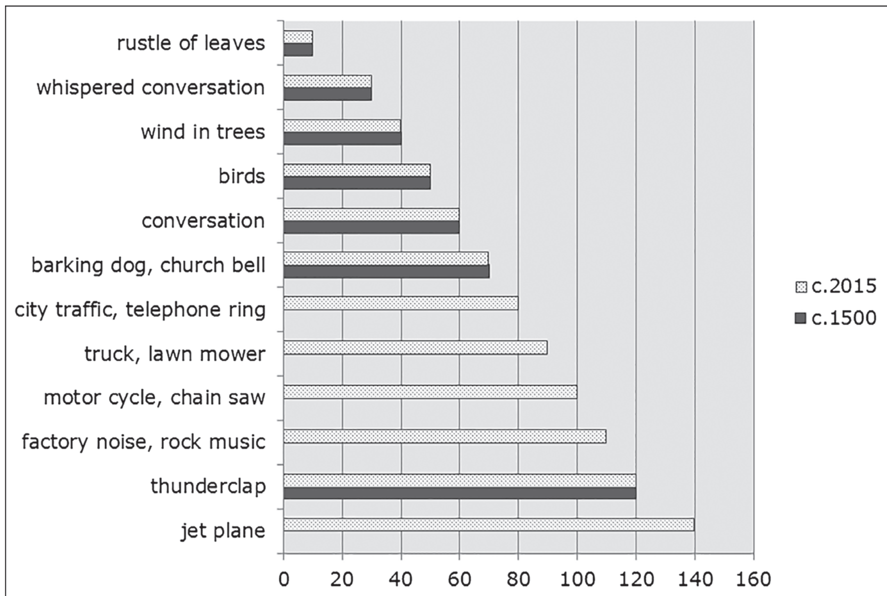

Figure 1. Sound intensities in dB, perceivable c. 2015 and c. 1500.

dogs or church bells perceived from a street level. These fall within a range of intensities that is nowadays considered normal; both a ringing telephone and average city traffic are louder than 70dB. In other words: there is a major part of the sonic spectrum in which heaps of stimuli occur nowadays, but none at all in the Middle Ages (see Figure 1).[19]

As a consequence of these differences, the audible range of sounds – also referred to as their acoustic arena – was quite wide around 1500. This is relevant because, with the exclusion of the largest cities, small and quiet sounds were generally likely to have great detail, impact and meaning within the pre-industrialized soundscape. Conversations, for instance, were easily overheard in the narrow streets, and voices were more easily identified because most inhabitants would be familiar with one another.[20] Sounds with the widest range

[19] Bruce R. Smith 2004:85-87; Bruce R. Smith 1999:49-51. The actual sound intensity, measured in dB, does not necessarily match the *perceived* intensity. One of the studies executed within the World Soundscape Project (Simon Fraser University, 1972-1976) aimed to make a profile of the acoustic community of the small village of Skruv, Sweden, by measuring sound intensities as well as questioning inhabitants on their sonic environment. Repeatedly, the church bells were considered the loudest and best audible sound, although measurements proved otherwise. This confirms the idea that sounds are perceived socially; the church bells were considered the most important sound within the community, leading the members of that community to perceive them as loud (Truax 2001:85).

[20] Truax 2001:79, 86-87; Bruce R. Smith 2004:85-87; Fisher 2014:11.

function as acoustic cues, enforcing a constant contact between local inhabitants and local events. Sound thus shapes acoustic communities within spatial dimensions, either in a landscape or an indoor environment. Additionally, sound defines communities socially and culturally – by relating to shared activities, rituals and obligations – and temporally – by marking community life in cyclic patterns.[21]

In late medieval acoustic communities, religious, social and cosmic patterns co-existed. The sound of the church bells, for instance, indicated the beginning of mass (religious time), the opening of the city gates (social time) and the beginning of a new day (cosmic time). Likewise, the parish church Sunday congregations structured the acoustic community both socially and spiritually on a weekly basis. The spoken and chanted liturgy even dictated a communal cyclical experience of the year, featuring changing themes, colours and sounds according to season. In the profane domain, music and dancing served as sonic indicators of time within the cycle of the year as well, for each seasonal feast was accompanied by its own tunes, its own festivities and therefore was known by a specific acoustic profile (examples include Christmas feasts, May-pole celebrations, and harvest festivals). Recordings demonstrate that sonic environments in the modern world move according to cyclic patterns as well, since the rhythms of the day and the year are part of nature and deeply rooted in human life.[22]

These and similar observations have led to the understanding of human sensory experience as closely related to place. The sounds offered by a particular place, shape the cultural background and thus the sensory perception of the individual residing in that place. This culture again re-shapes the places it occupies and affects the sounds produced there. As a result, individuals originating from a certain sonic environment perceive the world differently from people used to a different sonic environment: a town such as fifteenth-century Zwolle may appear quiet to a contemporary Parisian citizen yet insupportably loud to a Norwegian farmer. Therefore, cultural identities are not only defined by what humans do and see, but also by what they hear, say, sing and shout.[23]

Historical sources

A specific reconstruction of the aural experience of the parish church in late fifteenth-century Zwolle requires an account of the sonic environment of that space. Before proceeding to the actual sounds, two differences with modern

[21] Truax 2001:65-92; Schäfer 1977:53-56, 60-62.
[22] Bruce R. Smith 1999:79-81; Strohm 1985:2; Corbin 1994:79-138; Auf der Maur 1983:16-25; Atkinson 2012:42-45 gives a description of the daily rhythm defined by several bell towers in the Renaissance Florentine acoustic community.
[23] Fisher 2014:4-9; Bruce R. Smith 1999:47-48.

church experiences should be pointed out: in the late medieval church, the common people were not sitting on benches but remained standing up, and they were separated from the actual liturgical rituals by the choir screen. Although the screen partially blocked visual perception, religious celebrations were perfectly audible.[24] In the Saint-Michael's church in Zwolle there was no organ until 1504 or 1505, but celebrations would include church bells and the chanting and reciting of Latin prayers and psalms. However, sources indicate that there was much more to be heard than the mere sounds of religious practices and liturgical celebrations. Laws, measures, complaints and bills provide fascinating information on sounds in parish churches.

To start with, the parish church was the location where all laws and other important announcements were made public. After mass, when all inhabitants were present, the town crier would communicate all kinds of government messages in a loud voice. In the Eastern Low Countries, a particular law stated that decisions by the city council were not official, until they had been publicly announced in the parish church. On the other hand, many city councils attempted to restrain sounds in the church. In the fifteenth century, many cities (Strassbourg, Hildesheim, Heilbronn, Frankfurt, Braunschweig) took measures to ban all commotion from the church naves: conversation was forbidden, as was all commerce.[25] Merchants, promoting their stock aloud in the church buildings, could indeed produce lots of loud sounds. Moreover, the sonic assortment must have been considerable, for each product category knew its own, recognizable melodic tune. Also, several songs and poems are known that incorporate melodic imitation of merchants' cries in the streets of European cities, such as Paris, London and Amsterdam.[26]

This rather dynamic image of the parish church is confirmed by complaints from contemporaries. The canon Peter Schott (1460-1490) reports various abuses taking place in the Strassbourg cathedral. He complains about lay people ardently singing profane songs, so loudly that it hinders the clergy in singing mass. Additionally, people chat during celebrations and merchants and vendors continuously sell their goods. Others carry chickens and pigs, or roll

[24] Harper 1991:40-41. This was recently confirmed by the project "The experience of worship", conducted at Bangor University, 2009-2013, by John and Sally Harper amongst others, which investigated the spiritual experience of mass by real life enactments: www.experienceofworship.org.uk.

[25] Kuys 2006a:34-35; Signori 2006:126-129.

[26] For a detailed description of melodic merchants' cries, see Bruce R. Smith 1999:65 on merchants' cries in early modern England, and Dillon 2012:51-91 on merchants' cries in Paris from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. For melodic imitations of Dutch merchants' cries see the two motets '(goe)den Kaekharinc, drughen harinc' and '[...n] geselke [s]inn / nacht lijfcoep ende voirdeel [sijn]', preserved in the music codex Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek 1846.1 (ca. 1400) and the song 't'Amsterdam langs de straaten', transmitted in two sources, dating 1654 and 1655 and described in the Dutch Song Database (Nederlandse Liederenbank: www.liederenbank.nl).

large barrels through the church, even during mass. Even when taking into consideration the author's distress when writing about these terrible affairs, these complaints can be taken as confirmations of the relevance of the measures taken by various city councils. Also, complaints about the sounds of small children, birds and dogs that people brought along to church were documented more than once.[27] The presence of dogs is also demonstrated by bills. For instance, in Zwolle in the year 1475 a payment was made to a dogwhipper, who was to beat dogs out of the church building. Dogwhippers are known from churches in other areas of Europe as well, for instance in sixteenth-century England.[28]

Other bills, from Zwolle as well as other cities in the Low Countries, show an almost continuing process of construction and re-construction in churches over the course of the fifteenth century, which must have produced a significant variation of sounds as well.[29] These different sources all present us with the same sounds. Even when taking into consideration that one was not allowed to work on Sundays and Feast days – which should have moderated the presence of merchants, construction workers etcetera on these occasions – the acoustic environment in the late medieval parish church was much more intense than modern ears would expect it to be.

Since it is likely that the church visited by the Sisters of the Common Life in Zwolle was no exception to the descriptions above, this material may serve the reconstruction of the keynote sounds, signals and soundmarks of which this particular soundscape was composed. I will follow Schäfers distinctions as discussed above. As keynote sounds one may consider various human sounds (footsteps, coughing, mumbling and talking) as well as the sounds produced by animals (flies, birds, chickens and pigs). For a complete overview, see Table 1. Also, sounds of events occurring just outside the church would be heard near the building's doors, such as a passing horse cart. Signals, sounds conveying a potential meaning, played a more significant role in the experience of the parish church. In this specific context we can, for instance, think of a barking dog, a closing door, a talking child, a singing woman or the sounds produced by construction workers. Finally, the soundmarks, which were specifically recognized by the parishioner as belonging to a visit of this particular space, could include Latin chanting, church bells, merchants' cries and the governmental announcements by the town crier. A final, very important soundmark is resonance: the church building's even walls, solid floors and high ceilings created acoustics that amplified any sound produced. This is of course very specific to church buildings.

[27] Cowie & Cowie 1961:490, 494; Signori 2006:125-126, 132-133.

[28] For Zwolle, see Wormgoor 2007:462, note 174. The bill is kept in the archive of the Historisch Centrum Overijssel, Zwolle, AAZ01, inv.nr.1437, 38. For England, see Craig 2005.

[29] Wormgoor 2007:83-89; Kuys 2004:73-75; Kuys 2006b:84-85, 109-133; Van Aelst, Van Buuren & Tan 2007:25-26.

Keynote sounds	Signals	Soundmarks
Breathing, sighing, coughing	Barking dog	Latin chanting
Praying, mumbling	Closing door	Church bells
Conversation, whistling, laughter	Talking child	Merchants' cries
Shuffling of feet, footsteps	Singing woman	Town crier
Flies, birds, chickens, pigs	Construction, labour sounds	Resonance
Horse cart		

Table 1: A reconstruction of sounds in the fifteenth-century parish church.

A soundscape

Combining the 'soundscape' concept with historical sources has enabled me to make a reconstruction of the aural experience of the fifteenth-century parish church. To come as close to this aural experience as possible, I created an audio fragment, which can be downloaded at http://dx.doi.org/10.17026/dans.zde.d5ks. This is not a representation of a certain moment or event, but a paste-up of the aural stimuli present. While actually listening to this soundscape, one might notice that the scene is a lively one, and that it is not possible to grant equal importance to every sound. Since our sensory experiences are culturally determined, it depends on the individual – his or her cultural background, personal motives, and so on – which sounds are recognized first or granted the most significance. Although the space of the parish church exposed all users to the same sounds, their experience of this sonic environment may have varied according to perspective. In a way, my division of the individual sounds into keynote sounds, signals and soundmarks, was quite arbitrary, as there are countless other possible divisions.

Some of the sounds I previously labelled as soundmarks were derived from profane urban life (the merchant and the town crier), while others are tied to a liturgical context (Latin chanting and resonance). These observations indicate that the parish church can be characterized as a location in the medieval town where lay and religious aural communities merge. Some sounds in the parish church, such as whistling, laughter or animal sounds, were probably not noticed by urban lay people, as they were ordinary background sounds of daily life. Yet, it is highly likely that they were experienced as disturbing by those focused on the liturgical celebrations. When annoyed by any given sound, it is hard *not* to listen to it consciously. Therefore, disturbance is able to change a keynote sound into a signal, depending on the expectations of an individual. In other words, in this single space people could have various aural perspectives. There may even be as many aural perspectives as there are listeners.

When continuing in this direction, caution is called for. The difference between a sonic environment – being the accumulation of all sounds that are present and audible at a certain place and time – and a soundscape – that is: a reconstruction of an individual, momentary experience of the sonic environment – is

essential but challenging to work with. First, the nature of aural experience is highly alterable. It may change even from second to second and differ from one person to the other within the same sonic environment. This poses the question whether soundscapes rightfully can be considered to represent the experience of a certain location or event by a whole group of individuals, like the Sisters of the Common Life. Truly, individuality of experience cannot be entirely excluded since every sensory perception is culturally determined, each individual having a different background and personality. Yet, groups of people can be defined who share part of their cultural background, which we use to qualify them as communities or networks. These communities offer some ground for the extension of individual experience to all group members, since they are in part determined by the same cultural structures.

Second, the separate layers making up the soundscape as defined by its creators are somewhat problematic. The sounds produced by flora and fauna, for instance, are regarded typical for the keynote-layer, and human communication would be typical for the layer of signals. At the same time however, in the individual aural experience every sound can feature any layer. This unsettles the entire definition of the sound layers. Admittedly, some flora and fauna sounds are very difficult to perceive consciously, like flowing sand or an insect's paws tapping on leaves, and some signals are impossible not to listen to, like audible speech in a familiar language as opposed to human speech in an unfamiliar language, but variations apply. Therefore, when reconstructing a soundscape, it would be as well not to linger too long at these definitions, but to focus on the individual aural perspective straight away.

With the characterisation of the aural perspective of the Sisters of the Common Life comes an additional complication. Next to the sisters' individual backgrounds, preferences and expectations, their perspective depended on the sonic environment they were accustomed to in their own house. However, it should be kept in mind that the only available sources describing life in the sister houses, the so-called sisterbooks, are idealized life descriptions that were produced by the sisters themselves to set an example to their communities.[30] Although the sisters' perspective can only be characterised by some general remarks, this is relevant to come to an understanding of the role sound played in their daily lives and how this might fit in with the Rule of Silence.

To start with, most sisters were born and raised in town, and some of them occasionally visited lay relatives and acquaintances or kept in touch with all kinds of suppliers for the community's daily needs. They therefore were familiar with most individual sounds present in the city. Furthermore, some of the sounds encountered on the parish church visits, were probably present inside the convent's walls as well, be it on a lower intensity level. Besides the sounds of murmuring individuals while reading or praying, it has been observed

[30] There are no sources preserved that specifically describe life in the Zwolle Saint-Cecilia convent.

that spiritual exercises were often practiced with such passion that they were accompanied by emotional tears and loud screams.[31] As a result of the 15th century growth of many communities, major building activities – such as the construction of a chapel or the extension of the convent's building – were part of the sisters' daily world.[32] Also, some communities had schools where young children were taught reading and writing – as seems to have been the case in the Zwolle St.-Ceciliaconvent. Some communities had animals that would produce noise, like the Deventer Meester Geertshuis's cat that was reproved for loud meowing.[33] Accordingly, they may not have taken as much notice of 'urban' sounds as we might tend to think.

However, Sisters of the Common Life lived by strict rules that dictated silence at specific times and places in their community, designed to enhance inward concentration and inner devotion. Ideally the sisters were not at all annoyed or moved by any sensory experience; they were instructed to remain in a god-fearing state of mental seclusion, whenever they would leave their convent. They were not allowed to speak on the street, and obliged to look down at all times.[34] In the parish church of Deventer, sister Salome Sticken (†1449) once was so concentrated on her inner devotion that she accidentally lay down in an area where only men were allowed. Although she was slandered by a man standing near her, she did not hear it.[35] Judging from this story, Salome's aural perspective would diminish every sound to a keynote sound.

Even so, this goal of mental seclusion was sometimes not achieved and even consciously abandoned. Several sources report brothers and sisters complaining about being distracted when they had to visit the parish church. In the town of Deventer, sister Hermen van Mekeren (†1447) had the habit of questioning the

[31] Hascher-Burger 2008b:364.

[32] For examples of building and expansion, see for instance the convent of Saint Agnes in Emmerich (Bollmann & Staubach 1998:104, 112) and the Niesing convent in Münster (Kohl 1968:162-165).

[33] Brinkerink 1904:15.

[34] To persist in this mental state, some sisters continuously repeated the 'Pater noster' or 'Ave Maria' in their minds, thus shifting their concentration inward, listening to internal sound only (e.g. De Man 1919:151-152).

[35] 'Op een tijt solde een devoet bruder sijn ierste mysse doen in onser liever vrouwen kercke. Soe gaf onse weerdige vader here Iohan brinckerynck iiij of v van den oldesten susteren orlof die mysse te horen daer salomee ene van was. Doe sie in der kercken quam, doe genck sie geringe liggen in een heymelijck stedeken daer sie hoer vrylijc ende onbecummert tot onsen lieven heren mochte geven. Ende die stede daer sie op quam, daer en plegen gene vrouwen te staen, ende dat en wiste sie niet. Ende het en was niet veer van den altaer daer die priester sijn ierste mysse dede. Daer lach sie allene onder die mans. Sie was in groter devociën myt onsen lieven heren ende meende daer allene te wesen. Den tranen gaf sie overvloedelijc horen vriën ganc ende was myt also overvlodiger graciën bestort, dat sie van buten wat geruchts maeckte. Also dat die mans omme segen ende vrageden wat dat weer. Doe was daer een man, die segede: "het is een dolle begijne, laet sie betien!" Ende sie was myt onsen lieven heren also verenyget, dat sie niet en wiste wat by hoer geschiede, eer dat ment hoer namaels segede. Hoe dat sij manck den mans gelegen hadde ende wat sie van hoer gesecht hadden.' (Brinkerink 1904:9-10).

lay women after the reading of a sermon, to check whether they had paid attention. If she overheard them chatting about other things, she would interrupt them and speak about religious topics. If the women did not remember any of the preacher's words, Hermen would tell them that they were listening to God with deaf ears.[36] These examples show that at least some sisters were fully aware of everything happening around them when they stepped outside the convent.[37]

A PERSPECTIVE

One of the aspects of the urban sonic environment that is demonstrated by the reconstruction of an aural visit of a fifteenth-century parish church, is that sound crosses visible and invisible boundaries, for instance between communities and spaces. Therefore, oral literature – especially song – also continuously crosses those boundaries, on purpose as well as by accident. The combination of aural history and sound studies offers a pathway to come nearer to these oral processes, because it enables us to reconstruct what the functional context of oral literature sounded like. This offers leads for further research into the dynamics between those surroundings, the literature itself, and the way it was used in that particular environment.

The sonic environments of both urban and natural landscapes each demonstrate stable cyclic patterns, indicating a connection between environment and life style through sound. Songs are part of this connection, as is confirmed by psychological research. The perception of sound, and particularly music, is closely connected to the perception of spoken language, as all are directed by the same neurological processes. In this way, music carries all kinds of social connotations, it conditions our daily habits and it influences our experiences of the cyclic rhythms of life. Christmas songs, for example, are immediately recognised as typically for December, and may represent winter, family, candle lights, presents, snow and so on for their users and listeners.[38] In this way,

[36] 'Wanneer dat die werlike vrouwen van alrehande dijnge calden, alset soedanigen luden gewoenlick is, dat plach si dan te breken mit anderen stichtighen materiën, die tot Godewert droegen. Dicwile mosten si oer seggen, wat si van der predicacie ontholden hadden. Ende wasset dan, dat si niet ontholden en hadden, soe plach si sie vrendelike te schelden, dat si dat woert Gods mit soe doven oren hoerden ende geven hem tot anderen ydelheiden, daer gien profijt der zielen in gelegen en is.' (De Man 1919:194-195).

[37] Relevant here is also a letter of Geert Grote, the founder of the first community of Sisters of the Common Life, in which he states that an anchoress residing in a church is likely to converse with more people than if she were sitting on the market square: 'meer loops ende sprekens mitten luden […] dan of hi sate op die mercte' (Van Aelst, Van Buuren & Tan 2007:27).

[38] Tan, Pfordrescher & Harré 2010:251-252. See also Patel 2008.

music plays a vital part in the formation of aural communities within sonic environments.[39]

In light of these observations, it is not farfetched to presume that the late medieval practises of collecting songs and using manuscript song collections were also influenced by its sonic surroundings. Let us therefore take a look at an example. The second largest collection of devout Middle Dutch songs that has been preserved is the codex Berlin mgo 185. It most probably was produced and used by the Sisters of the Common Life of the Saint Cecilia convent in the city of Zwolle. Within this song collection, an explicit division is marked between songs 'about the feast of the birth of Christ' – which category besides Christmas songs also includes songs about New Year's, Epiphany and some winter Saints – and 'summer' songs – mostly songs about the Passion, Penance and Heaven, as well as various Saints.[40] In this division, scholars have recognised a derivative from the liturgical practise to organise texts according to the Christian calendar, dividing extensive collections into a Winter part (from Advent up to Easter) and Summer part (from Easter up to Advent), be it that this organisation principle was carried out somewhat inadequately.[41]

Yet, within the sonic environment of its functional context, this collection's organisation can be interpreted as according to a seasonal cycle that partly results from the functioning of sounds as indicators of cosmic, social and religious time in the late medieval parish church soundscape. Instead of plainly following the traditional liturgical practice of organising time-related text collections according to season (Advent- Easter and Easter-Advent) or to calendar (Temporale and Sanctorale), the maker of this codex took its framework from liturgical manuscripts and adapted it to cover a collection built around yearly high points (Christmas and Passiontide). As a result, next to representing religious time, this collection also represents the most important social periods of festivity. Moreover, in the song lyrics these high points are repeatedly associated with winter and spring respectively, which makes them indicators of the cosmic seasons as well. These songs might have

[39] In the last decades, interesting attempts were made to connect music to the surroundings in which it is being produced and used by scholars of sociology as well. The inhabitants of a city are considered to form part of an urban culture, which influences them when producing music. This music will in its turn influence urban culture, which may change as a consequence, subsequently resulting in yet another change in the music produced. By connecting music to geographical locations, sociologists aim to approach the social contexts in which it was produced. Music then is regarded a form of cultural identity (Lashua, Way & Spracklen 2014:1-18, esp. 3-5).

[40] The division is marked by the rubricated headings 'Dit is dat sangeboec dat somer stuc' (p. 0) and 'Dit is dat sangeboec vander hoechtyt der gebuerten christi'(p. 188). Instead of using folio numbers, I use the nineteenth-century foliation in page numbers in order to make it easier to compare my work with the findings of previous scholars.

[41] Van der Poel 2011:75-77.

functioned as aural cues of time in the urban sonic environment, like was the case with the church bells.

Balance

Notwithstanding our tendency to imagine the past by visual images, the late medieval parish church burst of sound. It has been demonstrated that a wide variation of sounds that are not usually associated with liturgy or with a religious, community-based lifestyle (such as the cries of market vendors and small children) formed an integral part of the sound world of the Sisters of the Common Life. At the same time, the dynamic urban sonic environment probably contrasted the sonic environment within the community to some extent: the urban sounds were known to all the community's inhabitants, but inside the convent's walls they were either not present in the same intensity or not present at all. These observations are relevant to all devout communities who did not own a chapel but depended on the parish church for liturgical celebrations, and by extension on other public spaces inside the city walls.

Aural history enables us to fine-tune our image of the devout sisters' surroundings, first and foremost by demonstrating that sound played a larger part in convent life than the Rule of Silence may suggest. By reconstructing part of the influence of the urban sonic environment on the aural experiences of devout sisters, I have demonstrated that there were actually lots of sounds present in and around silence-governed communities. Furthermore, the absence of loud sounds in pre-industrialised societies enhances the impact of smaller sounds. In an environment characterised by the aim to manage and limit all sound, the sounds that are present, stand out – be it the sound of singing, coughing, spinning wheels or animals. These sounds are also attributed more significance, for they are no longer anonymous. This indicates that we might have to rethink the devout concept of silence, understanding silence as 'managed sound' rather than accepting it as 'the absence of sound'.

Furthermore, the reconstruction of a soundscape offers a clearer insight into how exactly this sonic environment influenced the sisters' experience of a certain space or event. Those who wanted to shut out all non-religious sounds could do so. However, suppressing a sound to the unconscious layer of the individual soundscape demands a continuous "not focusing", but it is a common human problem that the more one tries not to think about something, the more one actually focuses on it. It therefore is plausible that most sisters every now and then failed to match the ideal image of the ever inward focused spirit. It has also become apparent that in specific cases it was not even desirable to completely shut out one's surroundings. In order to recognise these situations, one has to remain attentive to signals, thus rendering complete seclusion impossible. In this way, soundscaping helps us understand why the parish church visits were at times experienced as problematic and why some sisters and brothers objected to them.

The influence of sound on devotional practices is particularly relevant to the Devotio Moderna, considering the importance that was attributed to silence and to textual experience by its adherents. After all, the more the daily activities of an individual are governed by the managing of sound, the greater the impact of sounds on the experiences of that individual will be. This does not only refer to sound from outside the convent, adding to the experience of the parish church visits as problematic, but also to the experience of sound inside the convent's walls. In a silent, closed community no sound is anonymous or unnoticed. The impact of sound being great, the daily rhythms of working, singing, reading and praying are probably partly governed by sound – be it mostly textual sound – as well. In that daily pace, song and oral literature represent more than just text: a specific time of the day, for instance, or a certain period of the year, or a particular location within the convent buildings. Liturgical rituals offer many examples that are the results of this process, and additionally we may think of songs suitable to relief heavy physical work, texts designed to be read aloud during meals, texts and books for travelling brothers and sisters, and so on.

More importantly, the reconstruction of aural experiences has demonstrated that the dynamics of sonic exchange between an individual and her or his surroundings do not pass off in agreement with the ideal image that is advocated by adherents of the Devotio Moderna. The greater the focus on text, the more probable it is that surrounding sounds are perceived as disturbing, and by that these do not disappear to the background – as is promoted by the devout ideal – but they will figure even more prominently in the soundscape. With its different layers, the soundscape here functions as an instrument that reveals the dynamics between a sonic environment's components. The text that is performed aloud and listened to, or silently read and internally listened to, is a component of the sonic environment, just as well as unwanted or background sounds are, and takes its place in the soundscape. Therefore, it can function as soundmark or as signal, or it can be made to sink into the keynote-layer by some other sound, even during listening. The reverse goes true as well. Sounds from the individual's surroundings can acquire a meaningful position in the soundscape next to the text, enhancing the experience of it; and this might be exactly what happened to Trude van Beveren at the well.

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Summary

Since medieval literature was mostly consumed by listening, its functioning was influenced by the performance's sonic surroundings. This is particularly relevant for rethinking the circulations of texts within the Devotio Moderna communities of Sisters of the Common Life, that appear to have been governed by silence, but at the same time were situated within the rich urban sonic environment. Complementing traditional literary research, which relies on visual means of perception, this article explores some of the possibilities offered by sound-based research to oral literature, specifically song, in devout convents. A reconstruction – soundscape – is presented of the events that the Sisters of the Common Life would hear when fulfilling their obligation to visit the parish church on Sundays and feast days. It is demonstrated that sound played a larger part in convent life than is suggested by the Rule of Silence, indicating that the devout concept of silence should be understood as 'managed sound'. The soundscape also offers a clearer insight into how the sisters' aural experiences were influenced by their sonic environment. Furthermore, it offers a pathway to come nearer to the oral processes that are essential to the functioning of oral literature – especially song – in religious communities, as is tentatively illustrated by the Middle Dutch song codex Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, mgo 185.

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