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A hybrid way to navigate the city: Visual and aural cartography of the city of Athens

Abstract

Our experience of the city is formed through a constant symbiosis with a vast amount of printed information. In this article we illustrate the aural aspects of those printed information in the urban space. We do that by referring to current discourses around visual and sound theories and by engaging contemporary open source technologies / software.

The text is part of a wider design-research project which is in progress and which investigates the aural qualities of the printed information of urban space and tries to "translate" the so called visual noise of urban space into sound. The article is based in the conceptual end of designing an app which will translate the visual noise of urban space into sounds.

Keywords

Hybrid narrations, image and sound, urban soundscapes, urban informatics, visual noise, aural cartography, silent readers, visual identity, aural identity of the city, aural dimension of images, city soundtrack, visual and aural stimuli.

1. INTRODUCTION (Setting the frame of our research)

*"Obviously we need to be able to rest from sound just as we do from visual stimulation, we need aural as well as visual privacy, but silencing our public environment is the acoustic equivalent of painting it black. Certainly just as our eyes are for seeing, our ears are for hearing." (Neuhaus**, 1994**)*

The urban space in which we live, walk, interact and communicate is characterized by an acceleration of transmission of information images, as natural consequence of the spatial overabundance as Mark Augé (1995) described. This accumulation of printed images has fabricated a new multi-layered urban skin, which is as much architectonic (façade) as is readable.

Every city has its own tune, consisting of variable parameters (Oosterhuis, Schueler, 2008). Even if one extracts all the aural stimuli, the city still holds a visual echo. Printed images give the city certain "loudness", depending on the colour palette, the text, the repetition and the accumulation, the 'sound' varies. Absence of printed images gives a different quality of sound.

Athens is one of the most "visual overloaded" cities of Europe. Stavros Stavridis (1996) writes regarding Athens: "Advertising intruded on public life and established itself at its heart, appropriating the role of the public monument-landmark. Its presence in public places not only modified their form but, more importantly, also contributed to the creation of a new experience of the public domain."

The printed information in public space produces, besides a visual haze, an echo haze as well. Printed images are dominant elements of the public terrain we read

them consciously or unconsciously. All of us, the inhabitants of this city, are exposed to an overwhelming echo landscape that is produced by our interaction with public visual information.

Graphic designers are conscious of this echo dimension and intentionally use type and design tools to increase the volume of the communication, by this we imply the impact of the printed information to the commuter.

Following the previous research work *The-walk-in-the-city: a (no)ordinary image: an essay on creative technologies* (Antonaki, 2008) we aim to place the research one step further by "translating" the totality of printed material which is in public view into sound, giving to the visual an acoustic form, a reflection of the complexity of our sonic environments.

We consider visual noise an additional sound layer of the soundscape of the city. With this study we investigate mostly the echo dimension of the printed images in the City of Athens. Having a graphic design background we focus on commercial roads of the city of Athens as well as on some neighbourhoods where we are making an eye-level investigation of the printed information of those areas.

Our routes in the city have a soundtrack. Those '*visual' sounds* we try to map, '*record'* and *produce*. In that context we propose an alternative reading from images to sounds and we are trying to built an application that creates sounds from the printed images. By bringing to 'consciousness' the sounds of the printed images we aim to explore what we mean by 'visual noise'.

The sum of the sounds can be processed, analyzed and categorized, and thus become "blocks" of information that can reveal specific characteristics of neighbourhoods, of clusters of neighbourhoods and of the city itself. This information can be used to create manuals to re-read the city, to facilitate discussion and better communication inside and between the groups that comprise the city itself.

2. WHY ATHENS IS AN INTERESTING CASE

Going 100 years back when, "Sergei Eisenstein first encountered NY in 1920s, he was astonished by the city's dematerialization at dusk. As he recalled in the film *Sense*, all sense of perspective and realistic depth is washed away by a nocturnal sea of electric advertising. Far and near, small (in the foreground) and large (in the background), soaring aloft and dying away, racing and circling, bursting and vanishing – these lights tend to abolish all sense of real space, finally melting into a single plane of colored light points and neon lines moving over a surface of black velvet sky" [Mitchell, (2005), p.87] A depiction that holds true today, not only for NY city but for a plethora of other mega cities as well.

In Athens the scene is different. The public space of the city is characterized by an overabundance of printed information (commercial, political, cultural) and along with street art, murals and graffiti dominates main streets of the city, which could easily be described as a city with a *printed facade*.

What is the value –political, social and cultural – of the public space to the inhabitants of Athens? Could we trace here a cultural phenomenon that creates frozen "murals" of printed information? Just like the marble traces of the ancient city that coexists?

3. VISUAL NOISE in the URBAN SPACE

We are witnessing the apotheosis of the visual.

The contemporary urban space is flooded with data which need to be circulated, or else as Antonaki (2008) placed it with *information images* which demand our attention, they require to be communicated.

We exist though in a "supernatural strangeness", as Virilio (1980) described it. Speed, the body in motion, this feeling that the world keeps on coming at us while we stand still, the information is dismantled and recomposed in non-perceived rhythms "It is this intervention that destroys the world as we know it" (Virilio, 1980) and what we experience as simultaneous and inevitable could have been avoided. Virillo refers to *the physical speed caused by our movement but we can also consider this 'speed' as the way information images penetrate in our mind while walking. The fragmented way we receive the information, a random non linear process, challenges our perception in terms of semantic connections. We could* describe this experience as the violence of the image or else bits of information in motion.

We are surrounded by countless visual printed stimuli, posters, signs, images that crowd in upon us on every side. Acceleration of printed information, a new colourful, multi-layered urban skin is fabricated which is converting the urban space and changes it from a space demurely defined by traditional architectural elements, to one dominated by print. We could easily describe this acceleration and repetition of printed information as *wallpaper*.

Urban space became more and more colonized by the visual image, images both well organized and spread, both, purposely created and accidental. The façade of the architectural structure changes dramatically while whole neighbourhoods are covered with this *wallpaper*. Printed information is a dominant element of our everyday life, juxtaposition and superimposition of images, layers of information and materials.

Moreover, what it is widely believed, by communication theorists and the market of advertisement, is that the initial impact is vital (Berger et al, 1972; Morgan and Welton, 1986). What is the initial impact in the case of hitherto of visual images, in the case of this visual haze? Can our 'peripheral' vision translate all those image-messages?

Overabundance of information, this visual haze, or else this luminous chaos Paul Virillo (1980) traced as result of our "body-acceleration, a dizziness that reduces our environment", the body-in-motion mentioned before, disorientates human perception and interrupts communication. Images interchange so quickly around us –in a loop- that they adapt the characteristics of the *latent image*, meaning the not yet visible image. The messages are lost in transaction. "We are now so accustomed to being addressed by these images that we scarcely notice their total impact" (Berger et al 1972).

This interaction with the city fabric can also be described as a *picnoleptic experience* "We will be using the world 'picnolepsy' (from the Greek, picnos: frequent). However, for the picnoleptic, nothing really has happened, the missing time never existed. At each crisis, without realizing it, a little of his or her life simply escaped" (Virilio, 1980). Picnolepsia is a condition in which there are periods of cognitive absence where consciousness is blank. The subject is unaware of this lapse; like the urbanite who while commuting in the city passes in front of a massive amount of information images thus, he does not "see" them. A dilogy; the seen and the unseen, the perceived, the noticed and the elusive, the missing and the intelligible, the haze and the pellucid, the concordant and the fusion.

In what means communication is 'interrupted'.

What this overexposure to information offers us, then, is not enhancement of communication and of knowledge but an introduction to the concept of the apathy of the viewer. Dialogue is transformed to a monologue, creative interaction is replaced with the inertia of the anaesthetic viewer; the visual image talks to us but our vision is overloaded, is incapable of manipulating this massive amount of data simultaneously.

Communication is interrupted, as Morgan and Welton (1986) stressed it "It is clear that successful communication requires the active participation of both sender and receiver. The designer strives to convey a message in such a way that the audience can focus on it, interpret it, understand it and possibly act on it".

Besides, this collage of visual images, new patterns of the urban terrain, our body under siege entails fusion, both spatial and cognitive. "Any striking or unusual aspect of design can function as noise if it fails to reinforce the sender's intention" (Morgan and Welton, 1986). We can refer to this as *semantic noise,* which in the case of acceleration it turns to be a *physical noise*. The consequences of this are brutally obvious and I am not concerned only for the aesthetic impact to contemporary human, I am also sceptical for the social atrophy caused, "the lack of resistance" Deleuze and Guattari (1994) described, the inertia, the creation of passive viewers.

The walker

The origins of the nature of the walker in the urban space come from the *flaneur* in France during the 19th century, as a man of leisure, an urban explorer. Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin rose the *flaneur* from an urban spectator to a figure of inspiration for scholars, writers, artists, the situationists and phycogeography movement.

In this paper the walker is the resident of Athens, the commuter of everyday life, the one who "is concerned only with the ordinary, which takes on the dimensions of everyday madness" (Moutsopoulos, 2002).

4. THE SOUND DIMENSION OF THE PRINTED INFORMATION.

"I like doing sound portraits, I get close to someone's face, I take down the sound of the hair, the sounds of the skin, eyes and lips, and then I create a specific chord that relates to the face." (Neil Harbisson, 2012).

A shift from the visual to the oral or else the visual enhanced with the sound dimension.

McLuhan in his sensory analysis of our post-print culture outlined "the sensory shift towards an-eye based culture which has perceptual effects in the organization of thought" (Petrou, 2006). With writing men began to trust their eyes and to structure space visually. The eye became the privileged sense, causing atrophy to the rest senses which seem not to be actively involved to the experience of world of meanings. This process though created a linear rather than simultaneously sensory experience, and even if literacy offered individualism also caused sensory imbalance and confusion, moreover restricted our perception.

By bringing to conscious non visible aspects of printed information then, would offer us the opportunity to enhance our perception and uncover hidden meanings

and qualities of the print-based skin of the city. By reclaiming our acoustic space, possibly we would be able to make more complex liaisons, and think of the visual printed information differently towards a harmonious symbiosis with the architectural elements, the structure of the city itself and the human. Acoustic space is spherical. It is without bounds or vanishing points, thus we could think of a non-linear visual space, a space in which men lived before the translation of the acoustic into the visual.

As a culture we are trained to understand things via our visual spatial correspondence. This means that most of the times there is simultaneity between the viewer and the object viewed. Bill Fontana in his article *Sound as Virtual Image* notices: "As a visually oriented culture our essential responses to the everyday world are semantic", is easy then to understand, based on the reasons mentioned before, that this simultaneity is lost in terms of semantic meanings. We no longer accept those public printed posters as *information*, thus this phenomenon is described as *visual noise*.

The same attributes are given to *acoustic noise* "It would be noise because, by definition, it was random and carried no information" [Schwartz, (2012), p.834]. And here comes the interesting part, in both cases, visual and acoustic, we use the term *noise* to describe the information which is lost. As the media analyst Tony Schwartz claimed in 1973 "as we no longer accept sounds from outside our home or our control as information, so we treat that background as noise to be ignored" [Schwartz, (2012), p.832] the same way we ignore the printed visual information of the city as we consider it a background visual noise.

Sound and visual stimuli follow the same rules in the public terrain. If we think of the concept of virtual sonic boundaries (Blesser and Salter, 2009) acoustic horizon is defined as the maximum distance between the source of sound and the listener. Beyond this horizon the sonic event is not audible; it is masked from other sounds. Similarly we could speak about a visual landscape with an echo dimension; an horizon composed by printed information hanging all over the main streets of the town, a plethora of visual stimuli which are masking others.

Moreover, "Robert S. Shankland correlated the variations in acoustic quality among Greek amphitheatres with their physical parameters. He observed that geometries that optimized sight lines also optimized acoustics because they both follow the same rules" [Blesser and Salter, (2009), p. 96].

By citing those comparisons we mean to illustrate the significance of sound dimension in graphic design.

Do public information posters speak?

Walls covered with information in public space are the protagonists of our eye level vision of everyday life, they look directly to us, and as Mitchell (2004) described it in *Pictures want to be kissed…*, images 'speak' to us in a variety of tones and voice manners. They produce sounds or even scream as they beg for our attention. Think only, the bigger type the louder the sound, a vivid colour the more aggressive, posters in repetition a repetitive disturbing sound, colourful posters a symphony, a white surface a tranquil melody, a collage of different typefaces, colours, hues, forms an unexpected musical synthesis.

Is it then all visual? Which is the visual-sound profile of streets?

The aim of this project is to observe the printed visual information of the city as we meet them in certain roads of Athens and by pairing them to the *silent reading* of the citizens, to bring in the consciousness that the viewer-commuter is at the same time a reader. An active source of production of sounds, even though these

sounds are typically unheard. By this we mean that the walker is not only the receiver (viewer - listener) but also the producer (reader).

We frequently catch ourselves thinking silently about a meeting or the plan of the day and then suddenly our thinking is hijacked by thoughts irrelevant to ours, products of our random reading of the printed fabric of the city, scattered words which work as a stimuli and which literally develop their "narratives" in parallel to our thinking. Taking into consideration that eyes see more than the mouth can tell, we realize the massive amount of information the commuter faces. And we could easily paralyse visual noise with sound noise.

The scenery is getting more interesting if we think of the multiple commuters of a road. When multiple viewers (commuters) pass by those overloaded with layers of visual information walls, inevitably they read them silently producing layers of inner sounds (Brookshire, 2013) which are composed and performed in parallel to the acoustic arena of public space.

Our navigation and understanding of space though is made through our visual senses, we are accustomed to *see* rather than *listen*. Nowadays, culture is mostly visual rather than acoustic. This echo dimension though exists and is clearly traced both in *silent readers* and in the oral reading of ancient years when public readings in groups were common as most of the people did not know how to read (Manguel, 1997; Saenger, 2000).

Moreover, public posters-newspapers elaborated this perspective, a phenomenon which is nowadays lost. Newspapers were hanged on public walls (in order to minimize the printing cost) and passers-by would stand there and read them collectively (Crowley et al, 2007).

With this research project we try to bring together those two attributes of the printed image, the noise produced from the silent readers and its echo dimension in the public space.

Printed images as sound sculptures.

We are experiencing spaces not only by seeing but also by listening. In *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* (Blesser and Salter, 2009) the authors introduce the social component of sound in space by enlightening us how social relationships and interactions are influenced according to the sound variables of space. Effectively, the question that arises is: Which is the auditory dimension of spacial awareness in graphic design?

"Sound sculptures placed on the exterior of a building take on the visual aspects of the architecture and the urban landscape in which they are placed and create a perceptual tension between what you see and what you hear" (Bill Fontana, *Sound as Virtual Image*).

Inspired from art we think of the public posters as *sound sculptures* that each has a certain and unique sound. The quality of sound of all those diverse posters that coexist we aim to understand so as to uncover the dimension of sound, a fact that would help us to better understand what visual noise means and which are its characteristics.

5. CASE STUDY: CITY of ATHENS

The printed information in Athens streets (figure 1 & 2) present autonomy and visual anarchy as well as problems of aesthetics and design issues (Moutsopoulos, 2002). The visual landscape formed disregards the walker, it denies his / her existence, it is absorbed by itself. The walker- viewer- along with the pressures of the routine of the everyday life, especially at present with the huge social and financial concerns, is experiencing this massive oblivion as a

rejection. As paradox as it seems, this rejection creates the condition that the walker is absorbed by the visual landscape of the city as this is his/ her only physical surrounding.

However this physical proximity of the walker-viewer with the printed information on the Athens streets does not accomplish 'closeness' - a communication with the transmitted messages. On the contrary the walker fails to establish dialogue with his or her surrounding which, as it proves to be a monologue. The walker becomes a silent pathetic reader of the transmitted information.

Taking in account that the printed information is also a source of messages that convey in written language, contents of meanings, irrelevant to each other, the walker as a reader witnesses the "normality" of a meaningless fiction that develops along with his walks in the Athenian streets. The Athens walker is visually educated and eventually trained to avoid communication with his surrounding, as the basic tool of communication, dialogue, is out of use.

The walker is exposed daily to a terrain of multiple visual and sonic reflections which occur simultaneously yet accidentally – depending on the route of the walker. In that sense the public terrain for the walker is both a stimuli and the space of production *(*Blesser and Salter, 2009, *p.335)*. "However embodiment is no simple matter –the body as it performs in everyday life is realized through its interactions with its environment, an environment populated by the material and cultural products" (Morgan and Welton, 1986).

Does the walker-viewer of such a town in the long run transform his/ her receptive channels of his/ her senses? Does human present symptoms of attunement with the visual and sound stimuli of the town? If so what is the nature at present of the collective cultural and social behaviours we might trace in the inhabitants of such cities like Athens?

Figure 1: Visual documentation Zoothoxos Pigis str., Athens. Photographs by the authors

Figure 2: Visual documentation Thivon road, Athens. Photographs by the authors

6. VISUAL APPEARANCES of PRINTED INFORMATION of ATHENS (Observations and outcomes)

An invisible wall of visual homogeneity.

The streets of Athens –at eye level- are fully covered by printed media, as if they were the walls of an "invisible castle" (Mitchell, 2005) that separates the residential from the commercial (ground floor and first floor), also in terms of whole areas those invisible walls work as data mining fields (e.g. politically charged areas, areas of immigrants, commercial roads). They are characterized by similar patterns of information content wise.

Semantic wallpapers.

Posters in Athenian streets fabricate readable wallpapers and simultaneously create 'frozen in time' communication surfaces, most of the times multilayered, impossible to read. However these surfaces, as the organic skin of the city, are alive. They are endlessly changing day by day, year by year, washed away by rain, fainted by the sun, worn by the wind, forgotten by the passers-by, covered with dust, with new posters, and again the rain… they create autonomous, unexpected textures and abstract compositions. They become the *found objects* that could describe the city's history and life. The urban public space provides a continuously challenging surface, as quite often the walls of the streets that are covered by printed material lose all sense of real space and perspective

The city itself creates its own narratives.

Variable wallpapers. We could describe those wallpapers as *site-specific visual installations*; which give attributes to each place and which have political, social and cultural In the case of Athens the city itself creates its own narratives through its characteristics. They reshape their context according to the area, in that sense they create dialogues instead of monologues. Roland Barthes (1977) stressed "the death of the author", and Athens is a good example of this notion.

Athens *narratives* illustrate the political, social, cultural and commercial background of each neighbourhood. They also elaborate *inner zones* of the city, zones of exclusion and inclusion. And if we think of those printable façades as walls (which are political and socially charged) inside the city we could also imagine how they dictate our routes. De Certeau (2002, p.98) described the

spatial order of things "it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g. by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g. by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and *invents others*, since the crossing, drifting away or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements… the walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else"

The city's narratives are composed of all kinds of printed information, grow unintentionally. In the case of posters, thicker and thicker with different narratives layered (in depth and in length) as we walk through the city.

The city sleeps during the night.

Some metropolis like Las Vegas, New York and London are dominated by LED technology disseminating public or private information. Athens city centre rests during the night, in its visual silence, as most of the roads which are crowded during the day time are empty and not well lighted during the night. When the city wakes up, its printed public information starts its race along with the citizen, thousands of printed displays and posters scream out their content in a restless visual competition. As if one can't exist without the other (meaning the readable wallpaper of the city and the reader / walker).

7. ACOUSTIC PUBLIC APPEARANCES OF ATHENS.

The process we followed.

This is a project in progress. As explained before by the term "soundtrack" of the city we mean in a first level the composition that occurs from our silent readings while walking in the city, a soundtrack that maps our personal routes and in a second level the compositions which are formed from the aural dimension of the printed images of the city. In that context each area, street, wall has its own soundtrack, which is formed based on accidental circumstances.

An approach that combined a number of process steps, which were followed during our research is outlined in this section. They were applied in various different areas, including investigating typographic compositions, creating urban narratives, soundscape-cartography, soundscape composition, among others.

1. Digital input: Visual documentation of the public printed information of certain routes of the city of Athens (Str. Zoodoxou Pigis, Str. Stournari, Thivon Rd). Documentation was done via digital photographs. It was an intentional selection of certain routes, with an abundance of printed information,
2. Generation of audio: Documentation with audio recording. Personal recordings of our 'silent' day walks in certain roads of the city, where we read loud the content of the posters while walking, instead of being silent readers We also asked from other participants to record their 'silent' walks.
3. OCR readings: An OCR (Optical Character Recognition) application was used to read photographs that contain written information (mostly from posters) from the city. The results of the OCR readings practically re-compose those posters distilling the textual information. We used OCR

software to imitate the way we read. An algorithmic process of reading, an objective rather than subjective approach of reading. (figure 3)

4. Create soundscapes using the audio recordings. New soundscapes were composed by adding the audio recordings on existing sonic maps of the public place such as *radio aporee ::: soundmap* http://aporee.org/mfm/concept.html. An extra layer of sound information is thus created, which, until that point, was only existent as a subconscious/internal reading.

The next steps will follow:

5. Create a visual cartography of the area by mapping the colours used on the printed images. Use of the open source software *Processing* for the mapping.

6. Transform the photographs of the posters to sounds: Initial tests with applications such as *Photosounder* http://photosounder.com/ and *VirtualANS* http://www.warmplace.ru/soft/ans/ or via desktop application which we will create for this purpose Through this process we will generate 'visual' sounds; and better interpret what we previously described as the aural dimension of the printed images.

7. Cartography of the 'visual' sounds of the previous step: Routes in the city have a soundtrack; those 'visual' sounds we will try to present on the map of Athens. An auditory narrative of automated text, produced with this method, can be added in existing recorded city soundscapes in order to add visual and street noise together so as to better perceive the total echo of a city, and thus measure the total noise effect of a certain area.

A first approach to the meaning of "soundtrack" of the city.

"The ubiquitous presence of images far exceeds the conventional notions that images are just objects for consumption, play, or information. Images are points of mediation that allow access to a variety of different experiences (Latour). Images are the interfaces that structure the interaction of people with the environments they share" (Fiell et al, 2003). Images are the linking points. Thus their communicative role into our social, cultural and spatial environment is of big importance.

We focused on certain roads of the city of Athens and made multiple recordings of our routes in the city by asking volunteers to read aloud what they silent read while they walk in the city. Through this process the visual noise produced by the readable skin of the city was elaborated by the problematic of the aural aspect of all this information. Unsurprisingly, the narratives of our walk trips is an extra sound layer added to the soundscape of the city.

Taking in account the vast amount of the printed information which exists in the streets, this public typographic tapestry could also be described as a landmark, which encloses the recent history and the memory of the city. Local stories, habits, social and political reactions of the community all form an "organic" skin which is always in the process of creation.

Thus this typographic wallpaper becomes an imprint on the walls, both placed and found, accidentally created. It could be described as a piece of city's archaeology the same way the ancient marbles lay in between the contemporary built environment. An imprint loaded with narratives which describes the present social, cultural and political scene. In that sense we could claim that Athens uses printed information as a memory tool towards resisting the Lethe.

It is also important to mention that in the case of Athens the city itself creates its own narratives.

// 1. recording from Thivon Avenue.

Bosh batteries / technical investigation / decoration restoration / replacements / MOTOPOLI / NIKI COIFFURE / traditional butcher / material for murbles / tiles and granites APOLLON / car accessories / covers / hoods / mats / chains / car accessories / fresh fishes from around the world / healthy / of high quality in low prices / fresh fishes from around the world / the SMYRNEIKO / colors for cars / products / Festol / festo tool technic / OIKONOMOU / KNT / 3 M Theodorou / Thivon 25 Peristeri / La Sic / Hotel Maison / the Devotees / cream pies / catwalk / pastry shop / the building is available / 30% discount Tuesdays and Wednesdays / Classic Hotel Maison / New Atlas Thessaloniki – Athina / Eleftherios Venizelos / TEI of Athens / GRIGORIS / photography / digital phones / Media Markt / Hydrofund / gas installations / Tasos PIRELLI /

Figure 3: Narrative created from Thivon road recording.

// 1. recording from Zoodochou Pigis St..

Strike / dope / heroes and now / anti-Semitism / wire / great prices / Greek fascism /conversation/ in mid war period / we have moved out / garage doors / book conversation / Panic / Noisi publications / free trials / publications / smash the fascists / fighting for liberation is prohibited / studio for rent / space of expression / happenings / acoustic jazz / rentals 87 / rentals 85 / call for march against fascism / repression / planning / constructions / private parking space / artistic bookbinding / marriage invitations / we are looking for a roommate / satellite antennas / alarm systems / do not park here / Iridanos / demonstration call / smash the fascists / En lefko festival / fmash the fascists / not in Volos not anywhere / against gold excavation / grocery store / to be sold / bookbinding / call for a dialogue / freedom / printing business / strike / summer comedy festival / Sokratis Malamas Vasilis Bulas / Viva anarchy / Kufales / Logos is the

Figure 4: Narrative created from Zoodochou Pigis str. recording.

Initial tests of 'reading' the fragmented information.

We used OCR software to 'read' the photographs of our visual documentation, shop signs, political and cultural posters, stickers, posters of advertised objects and services of the athenian shops, originally purposed to signify the content of the products and the services.

Figure 5: example of OCR reading of the photographs

As Russel explains in *introduction to Wittgenstein: Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921)*, language's function consists upon the meaning of the sentences. However in our case –the walker as a silent reader, the body in motion confronted with all this vast amount of information- we have no sentences, we use as our source of reading just words that are forced to coexist in a certain surface of the urban terrain (the same wall, the same abandoned building, the same window frame) one next to the other. In an initial attempt to 'imitate' the way we read while walking on the streets, meaning fragmented, we used OCR reading as a tool to investigate how is formatted the extracted information by an algorithmic "eye".

The outcome of this process was an abstract auto composition of letters belonging to fragmented words and occasionally sentences. They produced a dynamic new layer of reading the cityscape with its own phonetic characteristics. These OCR readings did pop up with surprisingly fresh forms; the typographic elements detached from their surroundings because of the filtration of the reading and presented a playful syntax.

This pure form of the letters under awkward typographic characteristics mostly unreadable, fragmented, meaningless, unable to serve any communicative purpose, created its own autonomous forms of compositions. The elements of the OCR reading were products, of a second stage formation, which aural-wise sound weird when reading them physically. From this point of view the OCRS stand "at the edge", having lost the initial meaning of the words they initiated. Consequently, standing out of rational content they lose their main goal, that of communicating certain information, while they create new forms of interaction.

This fading stage becomes also a path of re-reading the experts of the words as letters and phonemes not with the intention to trace if some of the original meaning has survived, but to understand their sound dimension and quality at this stage. Even though the visual results of the OCRS present artistic qualities there is no artist who conceived them and realized them, they are projections of the town cityscape itself.

Next step would be to "read" those OCR images with some other software and try to figure out the sound qualities they produce. This will be again an initial experiment towards unveiling the sound dimension of visual noise which exists in the urban terrain.

The porosity that appear to carry this images produce a new understanding of the city walls covered by printed information, they let the cityscape to breath both visually and in an imaginary level, they also produce a net of points in the form of letters that demands to be seen and heard as such. These OCRS exist in the vanishing point where the words they come from have disappeared and new structures of meaning are formed, they introduce themselves as bits of fragmented information which "give" certain attributes to whole areas content-wise and thus they gain the right to appear their own role as protagonists, competitors, partners of a play totally open to all possibilities.

8. BRING SOUND TO THE FOREFRONT OF URBAN VISUAL COMMUNICATION.

"…sound as a carrier of information or as a factor of disturbance creates a dense acoustic carpet that permanently enriches our consciousness being processed and unconsciously filtered in the perceptual process" (Kleinen, et al, 2008).

The goal of our research is to bring sound to the forefront of urban visual communication and in so doing to achieve three interrelated objectives. The first is to account for the sociological dimensions of visual noise, which are rooted in the excess of printed information and masked by municipal quality of life discourses. The second is to bring into consciousness the legible aspect of printed information and the social role of graphic design in public spaces, which have suffered since their inception from a visual bias in their conception of spatial processes and practices. The last is to use the concept of aural culture as a means of critiquing the way printed information is used in the public terrain, which, by uncritically promoting the plethora of visual stimuli in the urban areas, overlook the importance of acoustic diversity and visual noise to the cultural health of cities. Finally we aim to create a design tool that could be used by graphic and urban designers to fine-tune the visual façades of the cities.

Hopefully the project will contribute to an interdisciplinary dialogue on the social and political impact of printed information focusing on the role of graphic designers.

We routinely exist in a condition of man-image symbiosis, we interact with layers of information unconsciously, with images scattered throughout our surroundings. Advertisements, layers of printed information, variable colours, people in motion, traffic, buildings, roads, and the structure of the city itself. Contemporary cities are vital mosaics – in development. Mitchell in *ME++:The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*, (2004) placed the scene one step further "in the future, there is some human confidence that unities may be formed out of confusion, patterns out of irregularity".

Sound and visual experience of space can align and reinforce each other. By increasing our understanding of the aural dimension of the visual images we aim to introduce an alternative navigation of the city, based on the personal soundtracks one is forming. For example we could decide our routes according to the aural dimension of the printed information. We also hope to outline the role of active rather than passive citizen, the one who decides and forms of his/her everyday routes in the city.

Figure 6 OCR readings from printed posters of Zoodoxou Pigi str.

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APPENDIX OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Visual documentation Zoodoxou Pigi str., Athens. Photographs by the authors

Figure 2: Visual documentation Thivon road, Athens. Photographs by the authors

Figure 3: Narrative created from Thivon road recording.

Figure 4: Narrative created from Zoodochou Pigis str. recording.

Figure 5: example of OCR reading of the photographs

Figure 6: OCR readings from printed posters of Zoodoxou Pigi str.