

Soundscapes of Wellbeing in Popular Music

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“Is it possible to write well on music?” This is how Paul Kingsbury (p. 91) begins his chapter in *Soundscapes of Wellbeing in Popular Music* (hereafter: *Soundscapes*). The question is not rhetorical. Kingsbury points to a serious epistemological problem not only for geographers studying sound or popular culture but for anyone engaged in social research. How do we write about a world that constantly resists our attempts to capture it in language? How do we study social relations, experiences, and encounters without freezing them into the ice-cube trays of representation?

This is the dilemma that *Soundscapes* takes up. The book does not offer a final solution but—something better—it demonstrates how such a problem can be rendered productive in research. Music is certainly difficult to write about. Yet this difficulty is also what, for the authors of *Soundscapes*, makes music a powerful analytic tool for examining the “messy and sprawling” (p. 2) spaces of bodily interaction. If *Soundscapes* can be boiled down to a single thesis it is that popular music provides an earpiece into “wellbeing”—in its social, economic, and material contexts (p. 4)—and a processual site where the imbrications of affect, health, and place can be mapped. What the book seeks, ultimately, is empirical validation for the claim that “wellbeing is embedded in the everyday production and consumption of music” (p. 7).

One of the major strengths of *Soundscapes* is that it engages this claim from a wide array of empirical contexts, methodologies, and disciplines. Chapters range from music’s role in the construction of commercial interiors, to themes of wellbeing and place in the music of artists as diverse as Morrissey, Staff Benda Bilili, Noel Gallagher, and Brian Eno, to discourses of health and identity at music festivals in New Zealand and street music in London, to a critique of Bono’s humanitarianism. When read as a whole these chapters, while eclectic, resist dissonance. What holds them together—not unlike Kingsbury’s aphorisms in Chapter 7—is the idea that the “interrelationships” (p. 2) found in a soundscape have more to say about our worlds and our bodies than any static object of analysis. A key theme running through the book is that this soundscape is

not so much a “thing” as it is a “doing,” where relations of health, place, and identity are continuously negotiated (p. 3).

If *Soundscapes* has a “gap” (p. 93) it’s that its eclecticism and “definitional inclusivity” (p. 3) around the issues of wellbeing, place, and soundscape often remove these concepts from critique, naturalizing them in their mutability. Some of the book’s chapters do adopt a critical approach, for instance, by showing how the production of music reinforces processes of capitalist accumulation—encouraging consumption in coffee shops (Chapter 2) or tourism at festivals (Chapter 8)—and how wellbeing and identity can act as sites of governance (Chapter 18). In general, though, *Soundscapes* tends to take biopolitical concepts at face value. Wellbeing, though multifaceted, is assumed to be an end in itself. Andrew Gavin’s reading of Noel Gallagher (Chapter 4) is paradigmatic: the musician’s ability to promote “wellbeing in terms of good times, dreams and belief in possibilities” (p. 59) is held up as necessarily progressive. Yet as the book’s last chapter hints, wellbeing—“life” itself—is never politically neutral; it is always bound up with social relations of exploitation and dominance.

That said, *Soundscapes* clearly has much to offer human geographers, as well as scholars working at the intersections of geography, musicology, and health studies, especially those concerned with issues of performativity and place-making. On an epistemological level, the book also helps address a long-standing concern in our discipline: that geographers tend to place too great a weight on the visual at the expense of other senses (see, e.g., Smith 1994). Taking up this concern, adopting methodologies that “hear” rather than “see,” *Soundscapes* speaks to those parts of everyday life that remain invisible to more-traditional forms of analysis. By the end of the book, it’s hard not to find oneself listening a little more closely to the world around us. We strain our ears to the music playing overhead, while we write reviews in coffee shops. For as Kingsbury (p. 92) urges us: “Music is a lively creature. Listen! It’s alive.”

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Reference

Smith S. 1994. Soundscape. *Area* 26(3): 232–240.