

Terrae Incognitae – Crossing the Borders of Sonic Ecology

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that a contemporary perspective on the soundscape must inevitably acknowledge the invisible agency of sound as a force that reveals the possible assemblages that make a place, offering ways to rethink the relations between power, politics and space in a critical ecological perspective. A number of art-based case studies support this thesis statement. In particular, the paper focuses on some projects developed during the Liminaria 2015 sound art residency in rural southern Italy. The analysis of these case studies entails a critical engagement with such notions, and the proposition of a possible approach in which the crossing of the current boundaries regulating the practices of field recording – in the ‘acoustic ecology’ perspective – is a prelude to a novel experience of place and territory.

KEYWORDS: acoustic ecology, sonic ecology, field recording, acoustemology, cultural and postcolonial studies.

1. Introduction

This paper proposes a critical perspective on acoustic ecology by questioning some of the categories which have traditionally orientated the interpretation of soundscapes within the field of sound studies in the last few decades. Since its formulation in the late 1970s, the concept of the soundscape has become increasingly popular, giving rise to a huge number of related theories and applications (Murray Schafer 1977; Truax 1984; Krause 2012). More recently, however, critical interpretations of the concept have tended to focus both on deconstructing the ‘static’ approach to sound which traditional theories of the soundscape often adopt (Augoyard/Torgue 2005; Chattopadhyay 2014) and acknowledging the possibility of reconfiguring the aural interaction between organisms and their environment in a new ecological ground (Barclay et al. 2014; Cobussen 2016).

Approaching soundscapes from a critical perspective leads us to break with the static categories that have previously dominated in most sound studies. It opens the field up to a problematic vision in which the relational and affective dimension of sound can emerge, offering a possibility to side-step the clichés of soundscape’s musicality that have been so dominant in sound studies through acoustic-ecological drifts and the Schaferian tradition.

Even the concept of ‘sonic identity’ (Pisano 2015), considered within such a framework, arrives at new possible outcomes. Against such a concept, sonic identity can be understood as a present and vital dimension of the coexistence and conflict between humans and non-humans, that is, as a form or as a problem of ecology in action.

Marcel Cobussen recently defined sonic ecology¹ as “the aural interactions between organisms – in particular humans – and their environment.” (Cobussen 2016)

This interaction has to be understood as a bidirectional process, engaging subjects action and reaction with their sonic environment – an environment which doesn’t exist acoustically *a priori* but is rather activated by its inhabitants. Cobussen’s perspective deals mainly with a new possible interaction between sound, the environment, and the human body, focusing on the ‘sonic city’ and marginalising the presence of non-human and more-than-human actors in the ecological sphere.

Expanding on Cobussen’s reflections, any reconfiguration of ‘sonic’ ecology must inevitably acknowledge the invisible agency of sound as a force for revealing the possible assemblages that make up a place, and for reframing them in new and creative terrains

1. Of course there is a differentiation between ‘acoustic’ and ‘sonic’, and between ‘sonic’ and ‘aural’. It draws on a problematic relationship stated by the same definition of ‘sonic’ given by Marcel Cobussen: “The term ‘sonic’ refers to almost any vibration that can be perceived by humans as well as animals, to the physical as well as mental affects of sounds, to what can be heard and listened to, but also to what remains inaudible and unheard. It thus encompasses musical as well as non-musical sounds, noise as well as silence, ultra- or infrasounds as well as spoken language and aural communication systems.” (Cobussen 2016, 3)

for human and more-than-human negotiation. Sound offers ways to rethink the relations between power, politics, and space in a critical, ecological perspective.

2. Rethinking Acoustic / Sonic Ecology

The starting point of this analysis is the possibility of shifting one's sense of place by re-assessing the aesthetics of digital practices of recording, listening, and remediation. This possibility finds grounds in the speculative and practical approach developed by artist Thomas Köner in his sonic works such as *Novaya Zemlya* (Köner 2012).

Köner's artistic investigation offers a novel experience of place by crossing the current boundaries which regulate practices of contemporary field recording. In Köner's work, every aesthetic hierarchy which would normally identify anthropic disturbance as the discrimination threshold is here turned upside down. There is no longer any room for a reductive and stereotypical sonic ecology of 'the soundscape as masterpiece of nature'.

Here, sound reveals its materiality and ontology. It unveils the ideology and discourses surrounding it, in which it is made to function as a means of smoothing over differences in thought, economy, gender, and identity, and fuelling a collective imagination made up of 'exotic' places – that is, places predicated on partitions which exclude other experiences and places.

According to Köner:

the notion of being 'at a special place' demands the acceptance of a world view that postulates a hierarchy of places, in which the special place on top is attributed more value than to the not-so-special. As these places are then declared as so very special, 'Human Disturbance' often is to be avoided, thereby enforcing the view that Nature and Human are separate and distinct entities. [...] Those who use this ideology try (successfully) to create an ill-natured hierarchy, as at its core it is less about the value of so-called exotic places but about a devaluation of all the other places that they exclude. (Köner 2015)

Augoyard and Torgue (Augoyard and Torgue 2005) call into question the macro-concept of the soundscape as masterpiece of nature, or a 'macrocosmic musical composition' (Murray Schafer 1994) which has been previously dominant in acoustic ecology theory. Such theories, see the soundscape as something perceptible in terms of musical concepts like aesthetic unity. Augoyard and Torgue oppose the clear and precise approach which Schafer demands as too connected to a hierarchy of high-fidelity soundscapes. Against this, they offer a hybridised, fuzzy idea of sound events inside a great many situations in the contemporary soundscape.

Through the concept of “sound effect”, the two argue that listening experience within a soundscape is connoted by relationality, affectivity and contextuality, overcoming the pure notion of an ‘objectual’ listening. They open the way for a possible change of the idea of the soundscape, from a static-identitarian reading of sonic place, entangled in a (stereo-)typical categorisation (i.e. the ‘soundmark’), to a more dynamic approach to sonic flows that characterise the continuum of listening in the contemporary ubiquitous media environment.

Any proposition for a ‘new’ sonic ecology should deconstruct not only hierarchical approaches to the sonic environment, but also “acoustical dogma” (Chion 2016), that is, the dogma of a causal listening in which every sound is considered as a sonic phenomenon produced by a material object. For Chion, this dogma is a deep ontological misunderstanding, driven by an obsession with causal listening, which leads us to consider sounds as consisting of *only* that which is produced by what we can see and hear, in disavowal of the dark, invisible, acousmatic, and intangible aspects of sound.

In this framework, we can argue for an ‘ontological equanimity’² which would question any causal hierarchy connecting sound to its source object and instead point towards a different imaginative and speculative possibility, one related to the essential and ontological dimensions of sound itself. As Timothy Morton has recently written, “[a] sound talks about the physical entities that made the sound. And yet it doesn’t talk about them. This is fundamentally because a sound is always a collusion between 1 + n things.” (Morton 2017) Morton argues that sounds are independent entities which need a host or a vector. They act as viruses and spectral presences which bring us into contact with an irreducible gap between essence and appearance, blurring foreground and background and disrupting the anthropocentric separation between subject and object.

This gap cannot be filled because it always distorts the ontology of things. It reveals to us how strange, ambiguous, inexpressible, and weird every aspect of the world in which we live is. This means that the ecology of the Anthropocene is a “dark” ecology, one that offers us a series of unsolvable riddles and declares the impossibility of fully grasping an era in which human history and geological time are so tightly interwoven that we cannot discern the human from the non-human.

Morton’s reflection on the soundscape interweaves with dark ecology theory when we begin to consider sound as a viral element that reveals the urgency of re-routing our approach to art, science, and language. Such a consideration suggests the possibility of crossing borders of sonic ecology into *Terrae Incognitae*, a space in which to imagine and configure other possible assemblages of place and to offer ways to rethink the relations between art, politics, and space in a critical, ecological perspective.

2. Email conversation between Miguel Isaza and the author, 14th February, 2017.

3. The Critical Listening Condition: Two Case Studies

To think ‘ecologically’ in this soundscape is also to consider sound art as a device through which to invigorate critical thought and open new and unexpected epistemological, methodological, and aesthetic spaces for rethinking the notion of ‘acoustic’ or ‘sonic’ ecology.

This is one of the conceptual elements on which Angus Carlyle and Enrico Coniglio developed their work during the *Liminaria 2015* sound art residency³ in rural southern Italy. The analysis of these case studies proposes an approach in which the crossing of the boundaries that regulate current practices of field recording – from a perspective of ‘acoustic ecology’ – is a prelude to a different experience of place and territory.

In the pages of his diary written in the week spent at *Liminaria 2015*, Angus Carlyle records the listening process, the routes, the meetings, and the moments spent with Chiara Caterina during the residency, where the two artists collected materials and compiled them into the film/installation *Night Time* (2015). The work is a story formed of scattered fragments, immersed in the villages and fields of Fortore region, searching in the margins of the folds for transverse temporal pathways, crossing a series of walkways near the village of Baselice. The mighty wind turbines, faceless watches that dominate these slopes, mark the circular alternation of darkness and light. In the waning of the day, they highlight a liminal transition to a sonic, mesmeric microcosm, hidden from human listening. The rhythms of the night reveal themselves when Carlyle and Caterina, with torches and equipment in their hands, advance in clearings and fields surrounding the village, intermittently illuminated by the red lights which signal the wind turbine.

While traces of human activity disappear into the invisible, distinct acoustic atmospheres emerge: the rustle of leaves stirred by the wind, the distant peal of cows grazing, the hiss of the air blades, scattered echoes of barking dogs, an imperceptible water dripping, night owls and bird calls, a fox barking. In this acoustic space, non-human resonances dramatically increase and the voice becomes an element that materialises vibration and body surfaces *beyond* the threshold of human language. Sounds, noises, and rhythms of this listening process suggest the possibility of moving away from a purely phenomenological understanding of acoustics, making it clear how this experience engenders in levels of sensations and contingencies of body flows.

It offers a sensation from which it is possible to question, as theorised by Michel Serres (Serres 1985), the hegemonic notion of language that has gradually separated itself from

3. *Liminaria* (<http://www.liminaria.org>) is one of the projects developed by *Interferenze new arts festival* (<http://www.interferenze.org>) taking place since 2003 in different rural regions of southern Italy: Irpinia, Sannio and Puglia (Barsento-Trulli area). All these projects focus on art, technocultures and the rural. From the original form of the art and new technologies *Interferenze festival*, a series of hybrid formats (residences, laboratories, workshops, research field projects) have been developed through the years, resulting in a research platform dealing with the concept of (neo-) rural and different multidisciplinary and critical approaches inspired by New Media Studies and Cultural and Postcolonial Studies.

the network of relationships that our sensory system builds with the world. From this perspective, talking about the sound and function of language offers us the possibility of reflecting upon the elements of uncertainty that regulate the production of meaning. Thus concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’, loosed from the constraints of rationality, rigidity, and accuracy in which they are confined by language, can be translated back into the sphere of processes driven by the senses.

Immersive sound works, such as the one described above, identify a research terrain within which to probe both the clichés of acoustic ecology (in which rural soundscape is considered as a hi-fi soundmark), and an anthropocentric approach to listening, shifting the perceptual relation towards the world from human to post-human. These recordings from different settings give back the enormous complexity of relationship between non-human agents (animals, atmospheres/density, geological formations, landscapes, and so on) and every possible understanding of the world through listening practices. In this non-anthropocentric, differential-ecological listening approach, diverse critical forces are involved, including bodily vibrations, resonant surfaces, and invisible agencies, revealing a process of materialisation in which territories reveal themselves in different ways and perspectives, not only in an urban but also in a rural context.

We can thus discover, for example, that the transformations of the soundscape reveal the methods of re-distribution of power and governance relationships, as highlighted by Anja Kanngieser’s research on air pollution in India (Kanngieser 2012), or in Angus Carlyle and Rupert Cox’s recordings around the deprivation of agricultural land in small, rural communities in the face of airport expansion in Japan. (Carlyle and Cox 2012)

This “acoustemological” (Feld 1995, 2015; Kanngieser 2014) approach also inspires Enrico Coniglio’s work *Sounding out the Watershed* (2015), likewise developed during the *Liminaria* 2015 residency. Crossing the wheat fields, farmlands, and rural areas between the two villages of San Marco dei Cavoti and Baselice, Coniglio proceeds to a sort of sound mapping of a series of paths, allowing him to focus on both the *in-situ* and in transit sounds, shifting the focus from the visible dimension and luminous space to resonance and depth – revealing the territory itself as a porous environment through the invisible level of listening.

Basing his practice on the theories of landscape ecology, Coniglio deals particularly with the hypothesis that a landscape is composed of patches, minimum structural units which come in contact with each other to generate ‘ecotones’ and border areas in which elements belonging to the original patches merge. Coniglio translates this approach in the acoustic field, immersing himself in the soundscape of Fortore and focusing on the richness of its transition areas. His idea is that these acoustic border areas – produced by the contact of patches – are characterised by width, depth, and a much greater variety than that of the individual parts from which the sound originates.

By acoustically crossing these areas, the artist experiences borders as a category of interpretation, no longer de-limiting but interfacing different pieces of the territorial mosaic. These marginal areas next to the boundaries are border areas. They are not perimeters but places of threshold, transition, migration. The area on which Coniglio's sound mapping insists, is the border between the two villages separated from the plateau of Mount San Marco (1,007m above sea level), placed on the Apennine and virtually equidistant from the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Adriatic Sea. It is a space that fully reveals the complexity of its listening layers in the recordings of *Sounding out the Watershed*.

On the surface, the recordings seem to disclose a calm condition which materialises in an acoustic landscape far from a heavy infrastructural devastation of farmlands. On deeper listening, however, the apparently silent landscape unveils a stratification that highlights its position between the traces of a number of recent conflicts. The repetitive, hypnotic sound of wind turbines scattered like wildfire in the Fortore area, whose rotating blades cut through the air like rhythmic strokes of enormous swords, are signs of the painful deprivation of land, space, and horizons for the local communities – a total exclusion from all forms of economic benefit generated by the territory.

Projected on an acoustic backdrop of hissing wind, the sound of these turbines is distorted, saturating the slopes of the boundless spaces of empty land that separates each village from the next. The oscillation of the blades and the constant rumble of turbines generate a fluctuating soundscape in which the power of the wind, the distant clang of farm machinery, or the occasional passing of cars resonate as echoes in an enveloping blanket of noise.

In the intervals and in the transverse paths between noise and silence, the levels and chains of activity and stillness within these geographies increase. Through them, we can feel the depth and space of the landscape in its dense sonic flows, static in appearance but in fact saturated with deep rhythms and cadences. To cross such a territory by listening not only respects its vastness, but also the richness of its transitions, transformations, slips, and conflicts.

The works of Angus Carlyle and Enrico Coniglio raise the possibility of defining a critical listening condition that could open itself to other modes of knowledge production. Beneath its apparent quietness, rural territory unveils itself through sound as a heterotopic space and extraordinary wealth of sonic-ecological otherness. The landscape can be reconfigured as an environment in which to experiment with crossing and recombining the elements, forces, and practices that exist within it. It offers the possibility of working on the crest of an ecological approach that recoils from any tendentious use of rural economy from a perspective of capitalist development.

4. Conclusion

Through a cursory look at some of the theoretical limitations of traditional discourses on soundscape, this paper proposes to re-consider the contemporary soundscape as a critical space within which to question categories and relations between subject and object, human and non-human, visible and invisible, material and ephemeral. Expanding on this ongoing process of deconstruction, we find that concepts of sonic or acoustic ecology open up a number of possibilities to trespass into the realm of responsibility, ethics, and socio-politics.

This attempt relates also to a possible 're-semantisation' of the traditional lexicon of sound studies – not to discard terms like 'soundscape' or 'acoustic ecology' but to critically renew their definitions. Acknowledging that the etymological root of the term 'soundscape' connotes an adjacency to visual terrain, it is within the conceptual scope of the soundscape that we must track down and approach the landscape, understood in its broadest sense, through its levels of transience, multisensoriality, and invisibility. To traverse contemporary soundscapes is also to encroach on post-human territories. It is to deal with a critique of acoustic anthropocentrism and with the possibility of exploring political relations in their material aspects, to re-define the terms of negotiation between human and more-than-human.

Sound, as a fluid, vibrational, and affective matter, enables a (re)negotiation of meanings away from the hegemony of language which has marginalised our relationship with *experientia* and with the 'nature'. By creating junctions and associations in its presence and absence, by revealing its imprecision as object and form, sound triggers auditory imagination and produces a different, sonic sense of things. In this way, sound can lead to new, uncharted territories in which it becomes possible to experience a more constructive relationship with the 'natural' world.

In creating an undifferentiated suspension of boundaries – 'grey zones', areas of "dark ecology", or 'noise' that appear to the listener with crucial questions – sound is in constant motion to disclose new aspects of the world, raising a series of questions about the notions of 'sustainability', 'environment' and, ultimately, 'nature' (Latour 2004). It is a proposition that can lead us to find new drifts, new havens, new escapes drawn by the infinite and unpredictable trajectories of listening. Within this context, we re-discover not only the possibility of inhabiting place but also, once more, of imagining and building complex environments. To make the experience of our thought, finally, an endless resonance.

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