
Indifference or Ambiguity

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1. Indifference

There is a property of environmental sounds that could be called associative, or perhaps imagistic. Others have named it cinematic or anecdotal. [i](#) This property could one day occupy a central place in the acousmatic discourse. However, in order for this to come about, the current discourse would have to pause from its focus on musical transformations and interpolations of found sound and begin investigating the social baggage latent in found sound. This baggage can be recovered by reflecting upon the cultural and physical origins of any source sound. In the case of sounds extracted from everyday social experience, these reflections may prove to yield insight into a sonic phenomena whose semantic complexity stretches beyond the realm of music. [ii](#)

The associative properties of environmental sounds are often ambiguous and difficult to pinpoint, even when their original identities are left in tact. The ambiguity is attributed to the fact that the number of associations from a given sound or sound world may equal the number of people listening. There is no way of saying exactly what the sound of a small burning fire will evoke for a listener. The context of the work in which it is heard may suggest or point to certain meanings, but there are never any guarantees that every listener will perceive these same meanings and not, for instance, other meanings entirely beyond the scope of the composer's original intentions. Some may challenge this presumption altogether by saying that sounds evoke no images or visualizations whatsoever. I can not deny that some people may feel this way, but I believe from the feedback garnered from my compositions that there are many people who do recognize these imagistic properties and it is from their example that I wish to carry forward this discussion.

What we safely know about sound associations is that they connect environmental sounds back to their origins in social experience. A concert listener might comment that a stream of memories and images washed over him/her while listening to a work comprising only environmental sounds. [iii](#) However, to generalize the likelihood for certain memories and images to be evoked from a specific environmental sound is, at the present moment, an enormous task due to the wide variations from person to person.

More importantly, there is the issue that listeners will not approach the crackling fire as an object capable of evoking associative impressions. The mood or atmosphere roused by the warmth and stillness of the crackling fire will either not be perceived as such, or else, the feeling will not register consciously enough for responses to be adequately articulated in words.

Therefore, listeners may experience a stream of images flowing through a cinematic sound canvas, but not possess the vocabulary to describe these images. Their inability to articulate their impressions might be the result of an untrained ear - an ear which is superseded by visual attention, and whose higher development has been restricted to the arts of speech and music. The conditioning in western culture to 'look at' rather than

'listen to' one's surroundings validates the indifference towards perceiving sound as a rich cultural text readily available for analysis and critical reflection.

There are other realms in which indifference is at play. The chief designers of social environments in the west have a habit of ignoring sound altogether in order to reach the more elaborate and refined structural goals that cater to visual aesthetics. General attitudes to listening in the environment would change significantly the day architects, engineers and city planners begin to include the activities of composition and orchestration in their job resume. By understanding these activities from the inside they would finally realize the impact their work has on people socially and psychologically. ^{iv} In actual effect they would begin to hear their creations the same way they see them before the first day of construction. Such sensitivity and understanding would yield a much more tasteful approach to the acoustic design of contemporary architecture. ^{iv}

Theorists in disciplines connected however loosely to environmental sounds have also been persuaded by the domination of the visual senses (or by musical prejudice itself) to completely ignore the study of environmental sound from a sociological or psychological point of view. The enraptured attention awarded to visual experience by many westerners makes such study seem completely trivial. After all, seeing is believing; what more is there to know?

Within the discourse of Sound Art, the issue of sound associations has been touched upon here and there, but it has never been dealt with in a detailed and focused manner. Douglas Kahn, in fact, would go a step further and argue that there is absolutely no historical tradition of audio art whatsoever. By audio art he means an art practice that works primarily from the notion that sound can act as a vehicle for social discourse. The absence of an audio art practice can not be perceived as a coincidence when considering that all of the twentieth century's "most noted radical attacks upon music... ultimately returned" to musical principles. ^v This is illustrated by Kahn in the following:

Luigi Russolo's 'art of noises' was recuperated immediately into the goal of 'a great renovation of music'; Edgar Varese's 'liberation of sound' was a motto of retreat when compared to Russolo's position; and at the core of John Cage's emancipatory project was a will to impose musical precepts upon all sounds. ^{vi}

In effect, what existed outside of the normal sphere of the musical source sound was brought back into the musical fold by the early avant garde to rejuvenate musical practice. These acts of rejuvenation only lifted musical discourse as opposed to having ever launched a school of audio practitioners interested in using sound strictly as a means for social discourse. The musical avant garde continually tailored new sounds to fit new notions of musicality, and in doing so, invariably stripped these new sounds of their associative qualities. ^{vii} It would seem that the extra-musical associative complexity of environmental sounds would have to be addressed by disciplines outside of music. In order to remain in the sphere of artistic thinking, this would necessitate a new branch of artistic discourse, which Kahn proposes under his heading 'Audio Art'.

Kahn's 'Audio art' has historically remained only a latent possibility, because whenever the impetus existed the technology was not around, or conversely, when the technology finally took shape the impetus was thwarted by musical prejudice. ^{viii}

The documentary film pioneer Dziga Vertov came to film only because the technology did not exist in Russia during the twenties to adequately record sound. Thus, Vertov's 'Keno

'Eye' was born out of a frustrated Keno Ear. Vertov writes,

Upon returning from a train station, there lingered in my ears the signs and rumble of the departing train... someone's swearing... a kiss... someone's exclamation... laughter, a whistle, voices, the ringing of the station's bell, the puffing of the locomotive... whispers, cries, farewells... And thoughts while walking: I must get a piece of equipment that won't describe, but will record, photograph these sounds. Otherwise, it's impossible to organize, edit them. They rush past, like time. But the movie camera perhaps? Record the visible... Organize not the audible, but the visual world. Perhaps that's the way out? [ix](#)

Vertov's way out was a fatal blow to the founding of a documentary or anecdotal school of sound production. Equally as decisive was a subtle shift in artistic direction taken by Pierre Schaeffer when he completed his earliest musique concrete experiments, approximately twenty years after Vertov became a filmmaker.

Kahn notes that Schaeffer's first musique concrete work *Etude aux chemins de fer*, which was constructed from train sounds, posed what Schaeffer called "problems of association." Schaeffer concluded that these problems would disappear if his experiments surfaced inside "the sonics of music;" where sounds ostensibly could only be "associated with themselves." [x](#)

This implies that the sound of that train would work more effectively if subsumed into the language of music. The outcome of this decision was obviously not good for initiating a social discourse around environmental sound. The social imagery latent in the train sound, or in all other environmental source sounds at the disposal of Schaeffer and his followers, remained unexamined and unacknowledged, and as a result, the birth of audio art was once again postponed.

Sadly, the path selected by Schaeffer continues to dominate the thinking of more recent acousmatic composers who have directly or indirectly followed in his footsteps. Acousmatic music, or the musique concrete of today, continues to edge against these associative properties of environmental sound. However, the vast gulf between musical invention and external social complexity continues to hold water, and it does so irrespective of the presence or absence of environmental sounds. Nonetheless, there is some present activity which goes against the grain and pursues an interest in environmental sound associations. The challenge that awaits the composers (and also the theorists) who move into this terrain, is the development of a vocabulary and a perceptual knowledge base for determining specific meanings from environmental sounds rich in potential associations.

2. Time for a Story

A listener wanders in uninvited, and strictly by chance, to a concert of acousmatic music. This listener does not know the meaning of the word acousmatic; nor the field of acousmatic music; and nor the story about the Pythagoreans.

Almost immediately upon arrival, the lights creep down to pitch black and remain that way for the duration of the performance. Electrified soundscapes derived from sources almost banal in their everyday domestic familiarity are beckoned by this inexplicable darkness. With these soundscapes, intense shafts of imaginary light poke out from the black. They imprint pictorial images on the mind, although the content of this imagery is

vague, hazy, fragmentary, and difficult to detail. The listener reflects, "These sounds are most familiar, but the worlds I enter can not be described."

Unaccountable sparks of excitement accumulate in the listener for the next ninety minutes before the lights creep up again to signal the end of the performance. The listener's imagination is racing, but at the same time, is fighting to find words to identify the experience. Places, atmospheres, landscapes, people, and dramatic predicaments fly in and out of the mind - lingering well beyond the applause and the quiet shuffles to the doorway.

"This may not be music at all," thinks the listener. "Instead it may be a drama without speech, a film without projections, or a painting transformed into raw physical energy." The listener opens a door leading the way out while considering that maybe the word music is incomplete and even potentially misleading. Perhaps the listener has just opened the door towards a brand new reality. A time and place where sound could serve a 'Theatre of the Imagination' complete with impressionistic traces of everyday reality. "Ah," mutters the listener, "if only these fragmentary impressions could yield something more tangible." Once again, the unconscious teases one with possibilities that are difficult to get a grip on.

3. Ambiguity

A composer is about to embark on a piece which contrasts notions of cold detachment versus warm intimacy. Many sounds or sound environments could represent either one of these notions. However, this is where matters get complicated. All or most of these sounds are going to have other sets of meanings inherited from other contexts or situations. How does the composer use these sounds and keep the listener focused on the subject of the work?

Should the composer take Trevor Wishart's advice, and limit the selection of sounds only to those sounds that the intended listener will equate with a specific meaning or association? [xi](#) Or should the composer follow Barry Truax's example of isolating one of the associated sounds and slow this sound down to reveal emotional and imagistic layers that were not evident beforehand? [xii](#)

There is also the issue of ordering events in time. Wishart says transform a limited palette of highly identifiable sound images in such a way that fashions a dialogue and interaction amongst the elements. This he believes is the root of articulating myth in music and other time based arts, as though symbolic meaning is latent in the actions drawn from a synthetic transformation of two or more elements. [xiii](#)

Truax, on the other hand, allows for temporal transpositions on the natural morphology of the sound to guide the listener through a process of examining the sound's latent symbolic imagery at a microscopic level.

Whether following Wishart or Truax, the composer is relying on various musical processes which are predicated on the technical facility and artistic necessity to transform a sound into a morphological form other than its original state. Truax allows the listener to hear the cries of seagulls, but he then stretches the seagulls in time to reveal what he calls the inner song of a sound derived from the external world. By structuring the gradations of the time stretches in a progressive fashion, and by framing them with the right descriptive title and program note, he invites the listener to journey into this sound and discover rich associative imagery that could not otherwise be discovered. [xiv](#) However,

when the journey is complete, will the message or imagery of the piece still come across?

Well with sound there seems to be no guarantees. Some will get it, while others may in fact perceive a whole set of other images and issues completely outside of the intentions of the composer. But - and this is a big but if there is a future for imagery in acousmatic music - the possibility exists for a listener to engage in the piece on some level other than the highly emotive and utterly wordless level commonly associated with musical listening experiences.

However, what if the composer elects to employ environmental sounds with only the slightest degree of manipulation and without any hint of morphological transformation whatsoever? Or more contentiously, what if the composer wants to erase all ties to musical precepts and journey entirely in the domain of audio imagery? How far must he or she stray from music? Where can the composer turn to for possible models and points of departure?

Will listeners and composers of acousmatic music ever be able to call a spade a spade - or is the sphere of aural imagery far too ambiguous and rich for such straightforward black and white meanings? Are such decisive conclusions even desirable in a field attractive for its semantic ambiguity? Finally, is the ambiguity of environmental sounds inherent in society's simplistic knowledge about them, or in the multi-layered meanings that exist beneath their outer surface?

It is premature to answer many of these questions until the auditory system is elevated to some level that is compareable to visual perception. The area in which this elevation needs to take place lies in the ability for listeners to interpret meanings in the sounds they hear in common everyday life. The inability to do so cuts off access to vital information that is equally as revealing as the personal histories suppressed by forgotten dreams.

Art can often facilitate heightened perception and awareness. Perhaps the first step to a heightened or expanded aural perception will necessitate developing works which ask listeners to dig for meanings in the materials presented. [xv](#)

Compositional strategies will then need to be revised in order to facilitate this new level of aural engagement. However, this revision can not take place until composers learn to listen differently, and begin rummaging more carefully through the vestiges of social experience buried in the undergrowth of the everyday contemporary soundscape.

Footnotes

i. I have used the terms associative and imagistic in the past when referring to pictorial impressions evoked in the mind of a listener by environmental sounds (see other articles and program notes on this site). Similarly, the term cinematic is used fairly widely to suggest that acousmatic music immerses the listener in a pool of film-like imagery. The term anecdotal has the deepest roots historically, as it was adopted by Luc Ferrari in reference to his *Presque Rein* cycle of works. [Return](#)

ii. Copeland, Darren (1994). [Cruising For A Fixing - in this Art of Fixed Sounds. Musicworks \(61\). Return](#)

iii. In fact, this can happen with classical and popular music has much as it can with

environmental sounds. With the insertion of well-known music into public and domestic environments being so common place, it is hardly surprising that a Chopin Nocturne or a Bowie pop tune can be connected directly in a physical sense to a specific personal memory. [Return](#)

iv. For more discussion on this topic, consult the various books and pamphlets published by the [World Soundscape Project](#) in the 1970's. In particular, R. Murray Schafer's *Tuning of the World* (Arcana Editions). [Return](#)

v. Kahn, Douglas (1987). *The Tradition of Audio Art*; EAR Magazine, Feb/Mar 1987. [Return](#)

vi. Kahn, Douglas (1992). *Introduction: Histories of Sound Once Removed*; in D. Kahn & G. Whitehead, ed. [Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant Garde](#), 1-30. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press. [Return](#)

vii. Ibid. [Return](#)

viii. Ibid. [Return](#)

ix. Ibid. [Return](#)

x. Kahn: *The Tradition of Audio Art*. [Return](#)

xi. Wishart, Trevor. Notes to CD Recording of *Red Bird: a political prisoner's dream*. Orpheus The Pantomine, 1992. [Return](#)

xii. [Truax, Barry](#). Notes to CD Recording of [Pacific Rim](#). Cambridge Street Records, 1991. CSR-CD 9101. [Return](#)

xiii. Wishart. [Return](#)

xiv. Truax. [Return](#)

xv. In the liner notes to the CD *Articles IndÉfinis*, composer [Jonty Harrison](#) addresses the importance for listeners to adopt a new mode of 'expanded' listening. Whereby, the social connotations latent in the sound palette of an acousmatic work are identified and considered. (Harrison, Jonty. [Articles IndÉfinis](#). empreintes DIGITALes, 1996. IMED 9627.) [Return](#)

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