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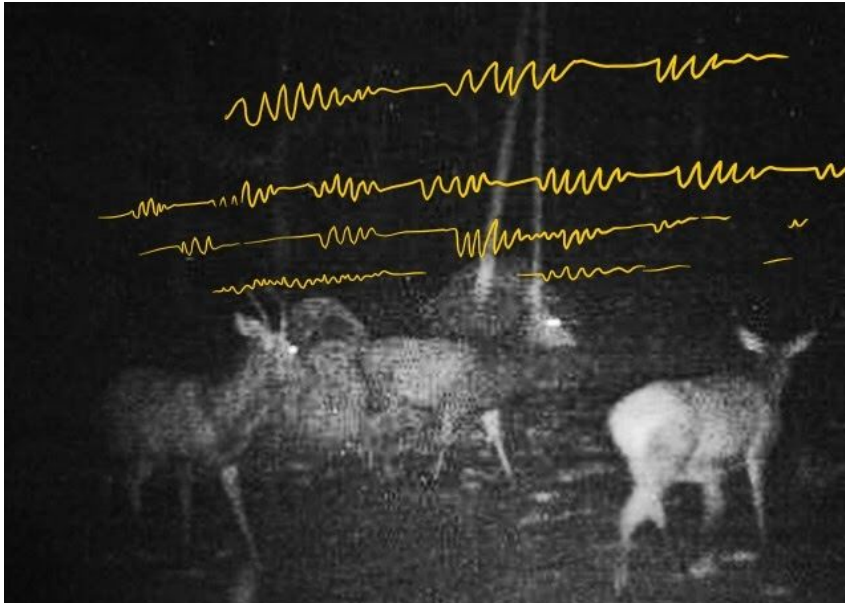
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Seminar tutor:

Mark Harris

How can listening and sound composition influence ecological thinking? To answer you will need to respond to Hildegard Westerkamp's article 'Linking soundscape composition and acoustic ecology', but might also consider John Cage's remarks about noise and silence.

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Swedish deer at night (Bradford 2017)

In modern society, it is becoming increasingly rare for us to voluntarily subject ourselves to what is known as “complete silence”, but when such a moment occurs, the world seems to speak up and suddenly we can hear the material qualities of our surroundings. Something as mundane as the wind rushing through a tree in bloom can be an epic orchestral sound experience. Even in our own homes, the rooms will speak if you let them. The creaky floorboards hint at years of use –much like the cracking joints of an aging body. Subtle vibrations from neighbouring rooms reverberate through the walls, perhaps indicating the presence of other people. Ambient buzzing noises emitting from miscellaneous electronic appliances merge with the sound of our breath, our heartbeats, and the sound of blood rushing through our veins amplified by the acoustics of the human skull. Meanwhile, the sound of the outdoors seeps through the cracks in the windows in the form of cars driving past. Some play loud music which then becomes distorted as it travels and bounces through and between the scattered brick facades of suburbia. This is the soundscape composition of this very moment in time and space. It is the voice of our world in constant flux, and it speaks to us about the state of our surroundings i.e the balance between nature, society, and indeed all living things including ourselves. Our own bodies, behaviours and activities are inseparable from the soundscape in which we take part.

Throughout the development of civilization we have been engaged in a constant dialogue with our sonic horizon (the farthest distance in every direction from which sounds may be heard (Truax, 1998)). Taking into account the vast amount of valuable information that is being presented to us through the environmental soundscape, as well as the organic nature of its character, it is perhaps no wonder that many have attributed spiritual qualities to its essence. It is, after all an organic entity, responsive to our presence and ever changing in accordance to the circumstances of its own ecology. “Before the days of writing ... the sense of hearing was more vital than the sense of sight. The word of god, the history of the tribe and all other important information was heard, not seen” (Schafer 1993). Historically speaking, humanity’s dependence on nature has been inseparable from our reliance on sound as a way of understanding the world. Through listening we have been able to map out and give form to our surroundings in ways where our visual senses are lacking.

However, through the development of advanced civilization, the separation of mankind and our direct relationship with nature has brought forth a new kind of soundscape environment; one which is more dominated by noise originating from our own structures and systems. This is particularly documented as an effect of industrialism, where the sound of machines such as airplanes, trains, cars are intrusive to the established sonic environment. Writers, ecologists and artists have been critical of this, and refer to it as the cause of an imbalance in our soundscape followed by negative effects on our environment.



Window view of Southeast London (Bradford 2017)

Meanwhile, since the dawn of the 20th century our relationship to sound has undergone a major shift due to rapidly evolving technological advancements. Since the invention of sound recording technology in the late 1800's, such devices have from this point only become better, smaller, cheaper and more available for the everyday consumer. Never before in human history have we with such ease been able to capture a sound and repeat it ad infinitum, and this has brought forth a new way of understanding and experiencing our sonic environment. Acclaimed audiologist and pioneer within acoustic ecology Raymond Schafer has described the split of a recorded sound from its natural source as 'schizophonic', arguing that the increasingly frequent intake of a decontextualized sound experience is detrimental to our attentiveness towards the soundscape, as it causes one to dislocate from the self (Truax, 1998). One could parallel this to that of motion sickness in cars or boats (or the more recent example of virtual-reality experiences), where a type of movement becomes disorientating as it doesn't correlate with our sense of balance.

"Since the invention of electroacoustical equipment for the transmission and storage of sound, any sound, no matter how tiny, can be blown up and shot around the world, or packaged on tape or record for the generations of the future. We have split the sound from the maker of the sound. Sounds have been torn from their natural sockets and given an amplified and independent existence." (Schafer 1993).

Schafer argues that the increasing influence of recorded sound in our daily lives contributes to something like a sonic oversaturation where an influx of displaced lo-fi noise subsequently drowns out the organic hi-fi sounds of the acoustic environment. In any case, advanced recording equipment is also an infinitely useful tool in terms of being able to "sonically photograph" the soundscape. The ability to record and manipulate sound has not only brought forth a shift in music distribution and broadcasting, it also introduced a new way of working with musical composition. Artists and musicians were for the first time able to appropriate sound from any imaginable source and apply these creatively, opening up a vast new arena of experimentation within the sphere of sound art and music composition. A prime example of such is 'musique concrète' –a technique developed in the late 40's by the French composer

Pierre Schaeffer, the principles of which lie in the assemblage of recordings from various sources in order to produce montages of sound. These samples were often modified electronically in various ways in order to produce a finished composition (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2007).

Within this emerging field of art practice with sound as a focal point, a number of people began to consider their compositions as a basis for a more critical analysis of the state of the soundscape. Among these is writer and composer Hildegard Westerkamp, -one of the pioneering actors in the practice of soundscape ecology and colleague to the previously mentioned M. Schafer. She proposes that the act of attentive listening to the environment is something that is critical to the future of society; particularly so in the face of increasing noise pollution and schizophonia. She suggests the idea that it is the responsibility of those who engage themselves with musical composition to bring attention to the ecology of sound. As she puts it;

“Some biologists have made it their calling to use their special knowledge and education to look at the natural world from the ecological perspectives. Why then should composers and musicians not make it their calling to use their special knowledge and education to listen to the world from the ecological perspective?”. (Westerkamp 2002)

Westerkamps work is largely composed of so-called soundscape compositions, similarly in technique to musique concrete (as in an electroacoustic montage of collected recordings). However whereas musique concrete regards the collected recordings as purposefully decontextualized from its source material, soundscape ecology (according to Westerkamp) works with an inherent focus on the acoustic ecology of certain moments in time and space, promoting awareness of the politics of sound and the place from which it is generated. Particularly some of her early work presents a narrative that is outwardly critical of the commercialization of the urban soundscape. Following up on Raymond Schaefer’s writings on schizophonia she aims to bring forth the problematics of ‘muzak’. This being music composed with the purpose of not being explicitly heard, but instead to influence a certain state of mind, particularly so to promote consumerism as in mall music or elevator music (Westerkamp, 1999) . This can be heard in her piece ‘Cool Drool’ (1984) which she initiates

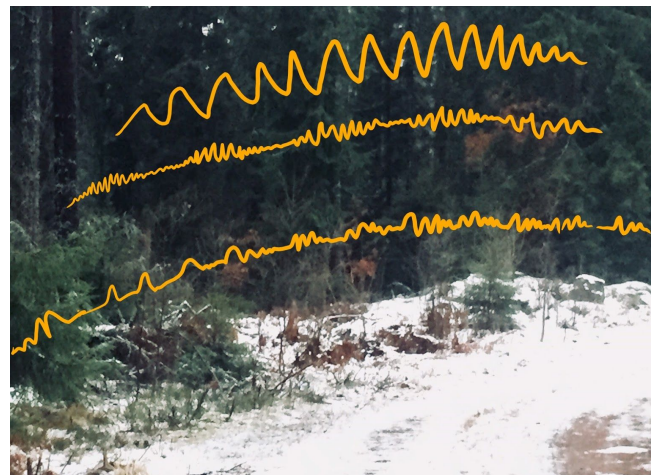
with a spoken word, quoting an excerpt of publicity material from the “Muzak corporation itself” (Muzak Holdings LLC) asserting the benefits of playing said music in the workplace to ease the boredom of monotonous activity. It is then followed by a field recording from Eatons (the clothing store) in which the sound of cash machines are juxtaposed with a choir rendition of Ave Maria echoing in the background. This is combined with the voice Hildegard Westerkamp herself, commenting that the music is put in place to lull the consumer into a state of religiosity. The sacred hymn is detached from its ecclesiastical origins and recontextualized where the action of buying clothes becomes reminiscent of a religious experience. This in combination with the previously quoted publicity material sheds an absurdist light on the ominous capitalist nature of muzak and its psychological influence.

Continuing on the subject of soundscapes and consumerism, her piece ‘*Gently Penetrating Beneath the Sounding Surfaces of Another Place*’ (1997) places the listener in a different yet similar atmosphere, consisting of field recordings from several markets in New Delhi. Unlike the soundscape of the western marketplace, which is dominated by electroacoustical noise in the form of muzak and advertisements, the soundscape of the New Delhi market instead consists of the voices of vendors, calling out for the attention of the prospective consumers, each with a distinctly individual melodic intonation so as to differentiate from their competitors. Something notable is the vendors voices and their awareness of the surrounding soundscape; as one would expect from a bustling outdoor marketplace the acoustic horizon is cluttered with noises indicating movement in the form of metallic clattering of pots and pans, squeaking gates and cars driving past. In the louder areas, the vendors are loud and assertive, whereas in the markets situated in calmer spaces they are distinctively softer and more melodic (Westerkamp, 1997). This is a place that is remarkably un-schizophonic, where the human actors are aware of their role within the soundscape itself. The electroacoustic soundscape of ‘*Cool Drool*’ appears harsh and static in contrast to the more organic nature of ‘*Gently Penetrating Beneath the Sounding Surfaces of Another Place*’.

Westerkamp suggests that attentive listening to our surroundings is akin to a political act; it is a way of recognizing the in some cases manipulative intentions of premeditated sound . Listening is a way of stepping out of that schizophonic state and grounding yourself in the very present moment of sonic reality. As mentioned, today we are bombarded by sensory

experiences in the form of music, speech, images, text, light. A majority uninvited and forced upon us in the form of advertisement and muzak. Our senses have the ability to filter out and focus on what we deem relevant, and corporations fight for this attention (as well as subconscious attention) through meticulously designed sensory intrusion. To listen attentively and fully immerse ourselves within the soundscape is to disregard that filter and give agency to the environmental noise that we subconsciously silence, and to regard all sounds as equally relevant actors in our surroundings (Westerkamp and Kennedy, 2017). According to Westerkamp there are ways of practicing this way of experiencing the acoustic horizon through what is referred to as “soundwalks”. It is defined as an hour-long walk to be performed either alone or optimally with a group of people. This is to practice on focusing completely on the soundscape of whichever space the walk is taking place. Crucial to the exercise is that any dialogue is kept at an absolute minimum.

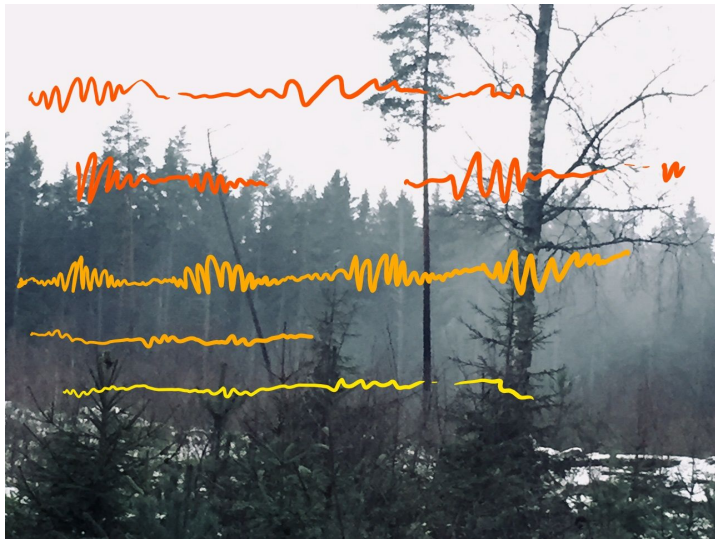
“Simply put, a soundwalk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is an exploration of our ear/environment relationship, unmediated by microphones, headphones and recording equipment. It is an exploration of what the ‘naked ear’ hears and how we relate and react to it.” - (Westerkamp 2001)



Snow covered path in Säby forest (Bradford 2017)

As previously mentioned, our ears -as opposed to a microphone- have the ability to filter and focus on specific facets within the soundscape, which correlates with the idea that all listening is subjective. The relationship between the “naked ear” and the microphone is therefore an important consideration within electroacoustic soundscape composition. Because of the inescapable subjectivity of the human mind, there is no possible way to create an objectively “true” portrayal of the soundscape of a specific place and time, “Soundscape composition is as much a comment on the environment as it is a revelation of the composer's sonic visions, experiences, and attitudes towards the soundscape” (Westerkamp, 2002). Westerkamp recognizes this limitation regarding how to accurately recreate a portrayal of a

sonic environment. However the technical limitations of the microphone are also a tool which allows the composer to direct the way in which the listener perceives the soundscape through post-processing, and the subjective reality of sound perception allows the composer to find their own voice through the language of the soundscape. Keeping this in mind, as is the case for many of Westerkamps compositions, the goal is not necessarily to recreate a realistic portrayal of the sonic reality of a place and time, but more so to capture the essence of an acoustic space and the experience of engaging with it. Westerkamps piece *Beneath the Forest Floor* (1992) is an example of such an approach. Composed of recordings from the old-growth rainforests of British Columbia, the piece is an attempt to capture the stillness of an ancient ecological landscape which has remained largely untampered with by human activity. Through the acoustic language of the forest, her piece speaks about the spiritual qualities of nature itself and our connection to places such as these which are on the verge of extinction through deforestation. It is not only about the physical space, but equally so about an inner space which is transmitted to us, as she puts it: “*the forest within us*” (Westerkamp, 1992).



Effects of deforestation in Säby forest (Bradford 2017)

It is clear by this point that soundscape ecology inevitably goes hand in hand with a cautionary narrative regarding the future of human society. That is, one that is critical of the ways in which we disregard our own co-dependence with the natural elements which we have relied upon to survive and grow as a species throughout human evolution.

Sound is a medium which historically seems to have been obscured within the periphery of contemporary art, perhaps due to its intangibility as opposed to the traditional art object. However, as a sensory impression within aesthetics it has been undeniably proven to possess the ability to suggest a great deal of information about the past, the present and the future, and today, multimedia artists around the world have begun to fully utilise the effects of sound within art practice. At the 2017 public art Biennale 'Open Art' in Sweden, Colombian artist Leonel Vasquez exhibited an immersive installation, floating on the surface of "Svartån" (transl. the black river) titled "The Rivers Cradle". Consisting of a wooden dome, visitors are invited to enter the space which is described by the artist as acoustic architecture, designed to capture and amplify the sound of the running water below. The soundscape of the black river is accompanied by recordings of lullabies from the indigenous people of the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta in Colombia, celebrating our co-dependence with nature and its waters, describing it as a nurturing entity (Vasquez, 2017). The fact that the river is highly polluted adds a somber quality to the piece. Through the sonic architecture of Leonel Vasquez, the inhabitants of Örebro were for a brief moment able to enter the body of the black lake and immerse themselves within the soundscape from which they are usually detached. The presence of the river, (a formative landmark within the identity of the town itself) is heightened, and along with it, the damaging effects of human negligence towards nature is brought forth.

This is an example of how soundscape composition is able to influence our ecological thinking in a practical sense, and arguably we have reached a point where this is now more relevant than ever before. Let's consider the fact that when Raymond Schafer warned of a schizophrenic society, the primary outlet for lo-fi electroacoustic sound was dominated by radio broadcasts and television; a medium which is becoming more and more phased out by more advanced systems of communication such as the internet. What is schizophrenia in a society where every imaginable recording is available at any moment? As an effect of the information age, our electroacoustic soundscape is becoming increasingly hyperinflated to a point where one can go about an entire day without subjecting oneself to the organic soundscape of the natural world.



Wild boar at night (Bradford 2017)

As predicted by soundscape ecologists of the 20th century, post-industrial noise pollution has caused us to disassociate ourselves from our acoustic surroundings and retreat inwards through increasingly advanced and connected personal electroacoustic devices (Buck, 2017). We are now in a time where each individual has the ability to completely and fully customize their own personal soundscape and upload any form of recorded sound to a global scene within an instant. The ability to distribute sonic material –which previously has been possible only through large corporations– is now available to anyone with a computer device, perhaps signalling a positive shift in electroacoustic dominance from corporations toward the individual consumer/creator. Furthermore, rapid technological progression presents many future advancements which are likely to radically change the soundscape as we know it today, prominent examples being increased industrial automation and the shift from combustion driven vehicles towards electric engines. As pioneers on the brink of a new societal era, we as individual actors are responsible for designing the soundscape of the future where ideally, through art, science and technology we can promote awareness regarding our own role within the ecology of our acoustic environment. Our existence within space and time is not a monologue but an ever present dialogue between ourselves and our biological as well as geological surroundings. Let's not allow our acoustic horizon to fall into the hands of manipulative corporate forces, but instead allow ourselves the space to listen, as well as take part in, the infinite orchestral composition that is our collective soundscape.

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