

BEYOND THE VISUAL

by David Toop

Environmental sound recording, otherwise known as field recording or phonography, is now a rapidly expanding aspect of sound art, yet its roots are peculiarly diverse. They emerge out of a complex network of specialist and esoteric activities: scientific research into animal communication and bioacoustics; oral history and radio drama; birdwatching, trainspotting and similar ocular pursuits; documental filmmaking; exotic sonic backgrounds; post-Cageian environments; and the soundscape studies pioneered in Vancouver in the early 1970s by R. Murray Schafer and the World Soundscape project. Because of these origins, many of them located in looking as much as listening, and an uneasy relationship to landscape as visual spectacle, in the past, field recording as an art practice has tended towards the picturesque, benign and static. As might be expected, environmental sound recordists have aligned themselves increasingly with wider environmental issues, since sound is so powerful as an invocation of place, memory, sensation and those states Proust described as 'unremembered'. Sound is a major part of our ecology. Over time, its negative effects can be as toxic as any poisonous gas, yet regulation is complex, since sound is invisible, mobile and elusive, culturally ambiguous, spreading prolifically through space and penetrating solid matter. In the past, field recording has grown from an unspoken anti-urbanism which would exclude people, motor vehicles, industry, and all other interventions that could be considered the audio equivalent of telegraph poles in a beautiful landscape. Sounds have been recorded for specific human purposes, such as the melodic beauty of a particular birdsong that somehow reflects the structure of human music. This has been changing for some time, however, with more concentration given to sound environments that Murray Schafer might once have described as an 'earsore', and more focus on the sonic ecology in which we actually live. Whereas the utopianism of the past appears to have stalled, confronted by overwhelming evidence of catastrophe, the current concentration on less bucolic environments seems more effective in making connections with wider issues of memory, history, geography, anthropology, physics, psychoacoustics, a sense of place, and so on, as well as being more closely integrated with music of the present. Paradoxically, these lovingly recorded collapsing ice floes, scrap heaps, machines, stories, electrical cables, fungi, distant storms, empty rooms, Cold War sites and market stalls may have more potential to encourage deep listening than the paradisaic landscapes of the past, and from deep listening comes a serious questioning of the proliferation of noise in all environments, and the significance of sound and silence in human society.

In the struggle to create a new definition of environmentalism, what themes can environmental sound recording contribute? Most sound recordists hold deeply felt opinions on this issue, yet they record not for didactic purposes but because they love the tiny, subtle specifics of sound. To be immersed in sound is to experience shifts of pressure, spatial awareness, the fine details of being alive. For my initial call for work from some of my favourite sound recordists, I suggested the following ideas: microscopic and inaudible phenomena (i.e. VLF, ultrasonics, electrical activity, electromagnetic emissions, air, wind pressure, silence, etc.), complex social/natural environments, being 'inside' sounds, walking through sound environments, natural sound in urban environments, human industry in wilderness, artificial nature, abandoned military sites and other signs of human occupation, evidence of environmental destruction, nature as a threatening and destructive force, notions of the formless, and so on.

In response, I received tracks that reveal environmental sound as an intersection with the unknown, the macro-world of humans and the micro-life within which they are enveloped. Chris Watson sits in complete darkness at night, immersed in the unearthly sounds of the Madagascar rainforest; in Australia, Lawrence English interacts dangerously with extreme weather; in Borneo, Michael Prime 'sonifies' the inaudible ultrasonic sounds of bats and the electrical impulses of carnivorous plants; Rob Mullender and Isobel Clouter record sounds of booming sand that are elsewhere silenced by tourism; Louise K. Wilson enters the resonances - acoustic and otherwise - of an abandoned and highly secret satellite listening station in the Australian desert; Peter Cusack wrestles with a conflict between aesthetic excitement and environmental degradation in Azerbaijan; Toshiya Tsunoda explores concepts of environment in Japan; Lee Patterson encounters a mix of aerial and submarine sounds in the English midlands; and Jeph Jerman uncovers the sound of waste in Arizona. For my own contribution, I contrast two versions - artificial and captive - of the pleasure gained from listening to animal sounds. In their different ways, these sounds are inaccessible, hidden or ignored. And all of them open up debates about ecosystems and the impact of human activity on the environment in which we live. They go beyond the limitations of looking, writing and the tangible with their familiar framing of experience, into zones that we can barely comprehend, a world of subliminal perceptions and detailed listening - a state of heightened awareness.

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