

A DISCUSSION IN SOUNDSCAPE

INTRODUCTION

We live in a very visual centric modern world, people always look before they listen and consciously take notice of the optic world around them. "Despite the importance of auditory experience in our everyday lives, we are commonly described as a primarily visual rather than auditory society." [Rodaway] Audio, sound, reverb falls on a more sub-conscious level that everyone uses, but doesn't seem to notice the discrete resonance of. If you were to go up to someone on the street and ask them to judge the size of a space, or the location of where they are, just from sound they could all probably do it, but sound always creates more of a feeling, an ambience rather than a reality. Maybe this is why people home towards visual perception, its seems more real. It is this truth that the study of soundscape and the practices that surround it rebel against, it fights to bring the sounds of the world, the "macrocosmic musical composition" [Schafer] of the world to the attention of the world. Schafer's idea is that we should partake in regular "ear cleansing" exercises, in which he advises us to open our ears to the world around us, its beauty and its complexity.

*"Now I will do nothing but listen.....
I hear all sounds running together,
combined, fused or following,
sounds of the city and sounds out of the city,
sound of the day and night..."
[Whitman, W]*

IDEOLOGY OF SOUNDSCAPE THEORY

Imagine walking through a forest on a frosty morning, the sound of the gelid ground under your feet, the crisp crackling of the leaves, and the placid breeze shaking the slender branches. How are they not instruments, and how is that not music? This is the belief (and one I share) of R. Murray Schafer, well known to be one of the most influential people of the modern soundscape movement, and the creator of the World Soundscape Project. He also in partnership with Barry Truax created rules for the study of Acoustic Ecology, in order to produce an area "which should be understood, not as a neutral field, but as ethically framed and intelligible one" [Vikman].

*"the world soundscape, the vast musical composition which
is unfolding around us ceaselessly" [Schafer]*

I think there is an important relationship to draw between music and emotion, and therefore soundscape and emotion. A particular sound can create a very strong subjective reaction, pleasant or unpleasant. The fear of a unseen rustle in the bushes or the warm welcoming crackle of an open fire on a cold night. All these sounds have there own resonance and meaning, even without their visual partner. Schafer describes these sounds as sound marks.

For me this was one of the most important aspects of soundscape theory and one that I used as a concept for a group of pieces called "Resonant Emotion". The three pieces each harbor a particular emotion, these being fear, loneliness and warmth respectively. For example the car driving away followed by solo footsteps at the beginning of "The Sea Crypt", used to signify being abandoned. I found that this simple sound easily had the same effect as a piece of music representing a similar sentiment. The most relevant pieces of listening for me was Janet Cardiff's works and the strong emotional narrative she uses throughout her pieces. Further on into "The Sea Crypt" I use a William Blake poem to serve as my story, while she uses her own, but I feel that a similar effect is created. In the piece "Warm Welcome" it is the stark change in environment from the cold outside to the warm, welcoming pub that creates a response.

*"She would sit alone, in stillness.
The wind across the tundra and the little waves lapping
on the shore told her secrets.
Birds passing overhead spoke to her"*
[Adams, J. L.]

During my recordings I experienced the effect of Schafer's theory of soundscape fidelity in first hand, constantly fighting with the amount of intrusive noise that the modern world creates. Schafer summarises that "a hi-fi system is one possession a favorable signal to noise ratio" and it is important in a soundscape piece in which the discrete sounds are foremost. How can the intimacies of a isolated footstep have the same effect, if masked by auditory pollution, "perspective is lost" [Schafer]. I will also take this moment to discuss the importance of recording and production quality as well as environmental quality. The soundscape "purists" such as Schafer, Watson and Cardiff believe that the process of recording should have as much consideration taken as the process of selecting the source. This means that professional equipment and techniques should be used while collecting material and also when editing material. Errors such as media drop outs, rumble and external noise should not be part of the finished project. This is the ideal that I strived for in my recording and processes, using professional microphones and taking care in my production to detect and remover errors.

Like always in art there is a counterpoint to Schafer attitude and this comes in the form of Pierre Schaeffer's "musique concrete", and Christopher DeLaurenti "Phonoography". While Schafer states that the music of the world comes from the natural sounds and that modern noise is a hinderance, Schaeffer believes that *any* sound can be music. This has a strong resemblance to Schafer's thinking, but as he separates human noise from nature naming us an annoying utterance, Schaeffer embraces it. DeLaurenti goes further to say that the noise created within the recording process is also part of the soundscape, because it is present in the recording and so present in the representation of the environment. I can see Schafer and Schaeffer's ends of this spectrum and think that each ideology has its place within soundscape, but personally think that media and recording noise is intrusive and unneeded, being more of an error in recording practice than any artistic endeavor. There is though a need for soundscape to not become an elite area, because the reason for it is to open the audio world up for a large population. I believe these view are apparent in my pieces, for example the use of both Schafer and Schaeffer's ways of thinking in "The Sea Crypt", with the human element of the car in which the "noise" is needed, followed by the soundscape of the cave in which the modern noise pollution would be unacceptable.

Another aspect I would like to discuss is the idea of a sound space/ sound field, or the area which a sound lives and interacts within. This idea can be shown very well in modern music production for example, the reverb on a vocal track that makes it sound more intimate. This is again very important to the ideas of Schafer but more so to the work of M. McLuhan. The idea is that when you hear a sound, you hear the source but also the source's effect on the environment around it or the reverb of the sound, and that the sound of the space is more important than the source creating it. Schafer describes the event as the "sound object" creating a signal during a "sound event" which in turn interacts with its surroundings to create a "sound field". The way the human auditory system hears and uses reverb is strongly based in the science of psychoacoustics and the emotional impact based in environmental psychology. For example the sound of some rooms can be cold, other warm just from subtle changes in the way it filters and delays the sound. This idea has been taken into consideration in the area of environmental psychology, with research into "auditory geographies" and creating public spaces that produce a pleasant auditory environment, as well as visual. The important aspect is that where ever you enter the "sound field" created by the sound object you will be experiencing a different sound scape. One practicality of this for example, is creating a space in which the surroundings cause the noise sound field to appear distant in the sound scape with the natural sound field more in the forefront.

In my piece "Virtual Soundspace" I used the modern method of convolution reverb to create a virtual sound space that has a very ascetic quality but is not from or based on any real world space. This creates a recording that detaches the source from its world space, a soundscape theory called schizophonia. The sound now dislocated from its original context can now be given new meaning and place with the composition. This is another theory that Schafer uses in his works, it refers to (as said above) the separating of a source from its origin. All modern recording produces this effect, you record something and then play it back somewhere else. Like capturing a butterfly in a jar and letting it go in another place, the butterfly will fly around lost, just like the misplaced sound. It creates an uneasy feeling, a feeling that something is out of place. Janet Cardiff uses this theory in her sound walk "A Large Slow River", to create a juxtaposition of sounds, between the real and the unreal. I chose to utilize this effect in "Night Lake" to like Schafer create and subtle feeling of nervousness. For example the sound of the train going by in the "live" recording followed later by a "ghost" version of it self. These techniques have been used in many horror films to great effect, the sound of the familiar within the unfamiliar.

The final facet of soundscape theory I am going to talk about stems from a more electroacoustic use of environmental recording. The previous ideologies are at their root (even though many artists have taken them further) based around recording and then light editing to create the finished article, there is not much use of digital signal processing (DSP) to shape the signal and source. Francisco Lopez uses DSP techniques to create new sound scape and source material from recorded environmental material. Looping to create beats and filtering to create new sonic characteristics to his sounds. In this way he is using the environmental sounds as the instruments and playing with them to create the music, rather than following Schafer's view that the music is already being played. My composition "Sound" was completely based on this fundamental theory with all parts of the track being created from three sources, and DSP processes.

OUTRO

Whoever reads this I hope you enjoyed my report and I insist you to step outside, open your ears and hear the world around you. There is so much sonic character to the surrounds we inhabit, so much music and especially so much beauty. Take some time to listen and experience the soundscapes you walk through, the subtle changes in space and bring the sub-conscious auditory world into the conscious.

*“We were taught to sit still and enjoy the silence.
We were taught to use our organs of smell,
to look when apparently there was nothing to see,
and to listen intently when all was **seemingly** quiet”
[Luther Standing Bear]*

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