Sonic Sensibility

Seminar's summary

We started the first session by listening to the works of sound artist Helena Gough. The sound filled up the space while we practiced deep listening collectively. As the sound then progressively faded out, we started to discuss what we have just heard, thus moving from listening to abstract textures into using language to address our listening experience. We were therefore practicing two different modes of listening: firstly, being immersed in abstract sound, stimulating our sonic imagination, letting our thoughts travel within the sound and experiencing it subjectively. Secondly, we shifted into a different mode of listening involving words and language and making sense of them. We then discussed a small excerpt of Salomé Voegelin's book Sonic Possible World where she defines *Sonic Sensibility* as a way to address the world *« revealing the invisible mobility below the surface of a visual world and challenging its certain position».* The collective discussion then questioned how we are being affected by sound and we spent some time trying to define differences between sound, noise and music. The assertions emerging from the discussion underlined that music might be mostly an anthropocentric understanding of organized sounds, while sound itself is a transversal phenomenon whose reception needs to be analysed as points of departure and arrival for heterogeneous forms of knowledge production. For instance, noise could be understood further than a negative connotated phenomenon but more like a complex affective information needing to be deciphered. A Subject-oriented and an object-oriented consideration of noise has been articulated by Marie Thompson as an ethico-affective approach to noise: *"When I refer to subject- and object-oriented definitions I'm referring, quite simply, to noise being defined either in relation to the ear of the beholder, or in relation to the sound-itself (…)The ethico-affective approach I develop (…) maintains the separation created by an object-oriented definition of noise between noise and negativity, so that noise's 'unwantedness' becomes secondary and contingent. It also maintains the contextual focus of a subject-oriented definition, so that noise is not tethered to particular types of sound or sound sources."*[1]. Sound and listening might furthermore be analysed from a transdisciplinary perspective resulting in manifold forms of sonic sensibilities.

The first listening session approached sound works around different forms of sonic sensibilities starting with Alvin Lucier's works "Nothing is real" and "I'm sitting in a room". We engaged with these sound compositions reflecting perception, the room, the recording techniques and the physicality of sound. We then left Alvin Lucier and did a "blindfold" listening of another sonic work, trying to identify the different sound sources of a work without any contextual information. Some defined the textures heard as an instrument, possibly a clarinet, as well as car alarms and explosions, while not being sure if the recordings were real or staged. The work we listened to was "Staryy Night" by Lebanese artist Mazen Kerbaj. The location recording features an improvisation by Kerbaj on modified trumpet, playing on his balcony in Beirut as the Israeli Air Forces bombed the city back in 2006 resulting in a *sonic journalistic* document as mentioned by Peter Cusack[2]. Kerbaj's abstract improvisation is interrupted by occasional bomb blasts, car alarms and dogs barking creating

[1] *https://soundstudiesblog.com/2017/04/10/noise-beyond-the-grandiose-and-the-seductive-an-interview-with-marie-thompson/*

[2] https://blogs.mediapart.fr/david-oppetit/blog/090417/field-recording-sonic-journalism

a tensed and menacing atmosphere of danger while the artist continues playing defiantly. This work demonstrates clearly that providing contextual information about sounds influence drastically the way one perceives the sonic world and that listening is never neutral but always oriented, situated and constructed.

The second session focused "the continuum of sound through history" and more specifically how the drone concretized shifts in phenomenological perception while exploring time and space through sustained sounds. Historically, we traced the existence of drone within different forms of traditional music ranging from specific vocal music in post middle-age Europe to Indian Classical music from Southern and Northern regions, bagpipes music in Scotland, Didgeridoo music in Australia and sustained tones found in the Gagaku Japanese tradition. During the 20th century, the use of drones often became central in many forms of adventurous music focussing sustained textures and hypnotic abstraction. We commented a text by Marcus Boon, The Eternal Drone, concretizing a genealogy of Drone music. Boon assessed that *"The drone (…) cannot be easily assimilated to one side of the divide by which modernism or the avant-garde has tried to separate itself from the world of tradition. Like the psychedelics, the drone, rising out of the very heart of the modern, and its world of machines, mathematics, chemistry and so on, beckons us neither forward nor backward, but sideways, into an open field of activity that is always in dialogue with "archaic" or traditional cultures".* In resonance to the text we listened to specific sound works like the wild guitar feedbacks of Lou Reed's abstract Metal Music Machine, the hypnotic works of Lamonte Young, John Cale, Marian Zazeela or Tony Conrad within the Theater of Eternal Music and the ecstatic and monolithic drones of Sunn o))) describing the very plasticity of sound nowadays. The drone and its microtonal overtones, resonating harmonics as well as the sense of infinite (or frozen) time perception it triggers has indeed been criss-crossing both the avant-garde and pop culture in the twentieth century while becoming a central element within (post)modern electronic music, film music and sound design. We then moved slightly away from the drone into yet another dimension of the physical and hallucinating effects of sound within a scientific context: When played at the relevant volume, the otoacoustic works of pioneer electronic composer Maryanne Amacher engage the listener with frequencies making the inner ear (cochlea) producing additional *ear tone responses or ear tones.*

In what she describes as a "perceptual geography" Amacher mentions *"how certain sounds are to be perceived in a sonic world becomes as important as the sounds themselves".* She then researched and explored otoacoustics phenomenon crafting electronically produced pure tones in the room triggering "new" tones directly produced by the ears (and the brain) of the listener making the human's perceptual, nervous and auditory apparatus an active producer of sound and not only a passive receiver. Amacher's perceptual geography is described as *"the interplay, the meeting of these tones, our processing of the given. I distinguish where the tones originate, in the room, in the ear, in the brain in order to examine this map and amplify it musically".* Her sonic architecture indeed unfolds at its best within the context of live performance and installation, thus making it difficult to be reproduced phonographically. The interactions of tones in the room, inside the ear and inside the brain of the listeners create radical *auditory dimensions* making Amacher's sonic works and researches essential. We close this second session with a deep listening to a whole Chapter of "La Trilogie de la Mort" by Eliane Radigue that marvellously explores hypnotic static tensions resulting in a milestone of droning electronic minimalism. Though exploring different forms of sonic abstraction, this session somehow only focused the sound produced by humans, thus underlining a tendency for anthropocentric perspective on the sonorous. It seemed therefore relevant to look into the non-human sounds for the following session.

The third session entitled “Ecocidal Anthropocene: Getting attuned to the architecture of ruins” addressed sonic sensibility as a way to reflect the relationships between human and non-human by more specifically focussing the art of field recordings and the relatively “new” science called eco-acoustics. The anthropocentric perception of sound and music has been in recent years reconsidered while documentations of nature sounds have been growing considerably documenting the Anthropocene sonically. Sound artists and scientists have been recording, collecting and analysing the sounds of both the ecosystems and the biodiversity, hence becoming informed by soundscapes of a damaged planet as well as recordings of many species menaced by a sixth mass extinction. According to a Guardian’s article from 2018 quoting a report from the WWF involving 59 scientists from around the globe that states: *“Humanity has wiped-out 60% of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles since 1970”*[3]. The soundscapes recorded by many scientists and sound artists demonstrates more and more the sonic signatures of living species and ecosystems facing disappearance.

The concept of Soundscape, coined by Murray-Schafer, has been a central definition to approach and think the sonic world. However, though essential for defining the field of sound studies, Murray Schafer’s positions have been criticised for being too binary, opposing “good” nature sounds (Hi-Fi soundscapes) to “bad” human produced sound pollution (Lo-Fi soundscapes). His vision of nature being often romanticized as a place of harmony. Sound artist Francisco Lopez addressed this dimension critically when evoking the phenomenological listening occurring in a tropical rain forest: *“Another widespread conception about nature sound environments regards them as 'quiet places', peaceful islands of quietude in a sea of rushing, noisy man-driven habitats. While this can be true for certain natural environments and under certain conditions, I think this understanding leads to a restricted and bucolic view of nature that I don't share. La Selva, as many other tropical rain forests, is also a paradigm of an antithesis to this view. It is indeed quiet a noisy place. The multitude of sounds from water (rain, water courses), together with the incredible sound web created by the intense calls of insects or frogs and plant sounds, make up a wonderfully powerful broad-band sound environment of thrilling complexity”*[4].

However, even if it is essential to address the complexity of natural sounds further than through an aestheticized or romanticized perspective, it seems that the soundscapes of the Anthropocene demonstrate severely damaged ecosystems that would demand a necessary re-evaluation of a too binary “nature/culture” dualism as well as taking the perspectives of the non-human in consideration when reflecting ontological and epistemological questions. To further this aspect, we discussed a text by David C. Jackson, the Sonic Anthropocene, where he analyses the work of sound artist Chris Watson “Vetnajökull” through the Dark Ecological perspective of philosopher Timothy Morton. Jackson underlines the fact that *“Watson’s 2003 album Weather Report directly poses questions about dark ecological thinking as it pertains to flows of weather, instabilities of place, movements of time, and the sound and silences of environmental transformation”.* The piece Vetnajökull focuses field recordings of an Icelandic glacier subjected to the transformation of climate and thus melting irrepressibly, shifting rhythms of animals, land, marine and atmospheric conditions. The glacier can indeed be seen through Morton’s concept of the hyperobject: an uncanny entity distributed through time and

[3] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/30/humanity-wiped-out-animals-since-1970-major-report-finds

[4] http://www.franciscolopez.net/env.html

space having different temporalities and offering dark ecological soundscapes. According to Morton, Dark Ecology proposes to re-evaluate the relationships between humans and non-humans through *weird attunements*. Following discussions around this text, we then examined a scientific article by Farina & Gage defining Eco-acoustics as a new science. We learnt for instance that *"the acoustic niche hypothesis (Krause 1993), an early version of the term biophony (sounds made by organisms), describes the acoustic bandwidth partitioning process that occurs in still wild biomes by which nonhuman organisms adjust their vocalizations by frequency and time-shifting to compensate for acoustic habitat occupied by other vocal creatures. Thus, each species evolves to establish and maintain its own acoustic bandwidth so that its voice is not masked (Malavasi and Farina 2013)".* We then spent some time exploring in details the technique of the spectrogram, a visual representation of a sound. We evoked an example of Bernie Krause's research[5] concretely underlining the loss of biodiversity through sound recordings and their respective spectrograms made in a forest over a certain period of time. Although the forest remains visually similar, the sound recordings and spectrograms clearly show a loss in biodiversity through a disappearance of specific frequencies within a certain amount of years. Rounding up this session, we commented an interview with sound artist Jana Winderen describing her practice of field recordings and her interest for sonic researches, ecology and more specifically underwater recordings. She states that *"human beings have a very limited senses, although act as they can understand and measure everything".* As an example, she mentions fishes using low frequencies in water for communication and orientation. We then listened to her complete piece "Spring Bloom in the marginal ice zone" documenting the sounds of phytoplankton and under water recordings using hydrophones: *"The marginal ice zone is the dynamic border between the open sea and the sea ice, which is ecologically extremely vulnerable. The phytoplankton present in the sea produces half of the oxygen on the planet. During spring, this zone is the most important CO2 sink in our biosphere. In Spring Bloom in the Marginal Ice Zone the sounds of the living creatures become a voice in the current political debate concerning the official definition of the location of the ice edge. The listener experiences the bloom of plankton, the shifting and crackling sea ice in the Barents Sea around Spitsbergen, towards the North Pole, and the underwater sounds made by bearded seals, migrating species such as humpbacks and orcas, and the sound made by hunting saithe, crustaceans and spawning cod, all depending on the spring bloom".*[6] Sound and listening might indeed help us to re-think the relations and interactions between humans & non-humans.

The fourth session entitles "situated and embodied practices of empathic listening" focussed texts by Annie Goh and Marie Thompson as well as their practical implementations within the works of Anna Frei and Franziska Koch, artists and organizers of the platform OOR in Zürich, both present as guests for this session.
Marie Thompson "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies" advocates that a *"(re)turn to ontology in sound studies is predicated on an 'origin myth' that disavows 'old' questions of culture, signification, discourse and identity, and promotes 'new' questions of materiality, affectivity reality and being".* Christopher Cox's Sonic Materialism theory is criticized by Thompson for taking a *"racialized perceptual standpoint that is both situated and universalizing"* and exemplified through a particular critique of John Cage's positions in what

[5] http://www.wildsanctuary.com

[6] http://www.janawinderen.com/releases/tone_65_jana_winderen_spring_b.html#.XOwyYy35zOQ

Thompson perceived as reproducing a problematic "white aurality". Thompson's argument underlines a need for a new resituated ontology enabling other hearings. Furthermore, Thompson analyses two sound works: The first one being Lawrence English's compilation *Airport Symphony* and the other one Chino Amobi's *Airport Music for Black Folks,* both made in resonance to Brian Eno's *Music for Airport*. English's airport symphony (featuring a cast of sound artists each proposing a track) is analysed as being mostly focussing on abstract, depersonalized and virtual dimensions of sound resulting in a somehow reductive aestheticization of airports and/or aircrafts drones and field recordings. According to Thompson, Amobi's work addresses on the contrary the perspective of power relations, visible and invisible structures creating binaries and inequalities in society. *"In the opening track, 'London', robotic announcements, electronic hums, squalls and clicks, abrasive buzzers and fading sirens accompany an eerie spoken word recital*". Evoking the perspective of PoC's travelling and confronted to longer security procedures and surveillance at the airport, Amobi underlines problematics not present in Lawrence English's airport symphony: *"If Airport Symphony can be heard as noisily evoking a Deleuzian ontology of flow and flux, Airport Music for Black Folk might be heard as noisily evoking Fred Moten's aforementioned paraontology of disorder".*

Annie Goh's "Sounding Situated Knowledges: Echo in Archaeoacoustics" proposes to analyse how *"sound and listening produces knowledge"* while needing *"a greater interrogation of the subject-object relation via feminist epistemologies (…) positioning against a presumed neutrality in science and philosophy".* Taking Donna Harraway's concept of situated knowledge and shifting it to *sounding situated knowledge*, she re-addresses the dominant dualism of "nature/culture" and "subject/objects" articulations in sound studies. Goh conceptualizes "archeoacoustics", a method used in archaeology to approach specific sites from the acoustic perspectives, and further addresses the Echo as a feminist figure. Criticising the sonic naturalism of Murray-Schafer for its limited dualism of the articulation of nature and culture and for being clearly gendered, Goh proposes a shift in listening to history from the perspective of *resounding situated knowledge*. Furthermore, she criticises Jean-Luc Nancy and Christopher Cox for their problematic propensities (just like Schafer) to *"(…) neglecting to address the subject-object relations in how they produce knowledge through sound and listening".* Goh further reads the figure of the Echo similar to Donna Harraway's figure of the Cyborg and understands Echo in the Metamorphoses of Ovide as a feminist figure and Narcisse as a masculinist one: *"Echo as myth of audible repetition comes to signify a critical junction between self and other. A cyborgian echo in sonic knowledge production is a material-semiotic figure through which to think the various affordances which sounding brings to situated knowledges. Some characteristics of these have been suggested via the work of Feld Henriques above such as: embodiedness, dynamism, relationality, accountability, and a questioning of what knowledge is."* The work of Annie Goh through her concept of Sounding Situated Knowledge permits to productively and critically examine sonic knowledge production.

After discussing the texts, we moved into a presentation and discussion about OOR records by Anna Frei and Franziska Koch that underlined how to concretely implement theoretical approaches and strategies like the ones described in Annie Goh and Marie Thompson texts and to turn these concepts productively into the organisation of their own artistic practices. They mentioned that addressing intersectional queer/feminist or critical whiteness perspectives within their sonic practices is a relevant task albeit also involve paradoxical and ambivalent positions.

The fifth session proposed to explore the origin and development of sound design through the works of independent researcher Juliette Volcler who was invited to participate to the session. Juliette Volcler presented her transdisciplinary research crossing a vast field of disciplines and practices when addressing sound and listening: starting from researches on sonic weapons, she also focused radio practices and further explored the history of (audio) technology while nowadays specifically researching sound design. Volcler's works develop tools to help deconstructing listening practices and thinking sound critically.
She possibly locates the origin of sound design within two moments: first as Walter Murch got credited as a *sound designer* in Francis Ford Coppola's movie "Apocalypse Now" in 1979 (that movie being acknowledged as a landmark for the sound design in film) and secondly, in a text by (again) Murray-Schaffer *The Acoustic Environment* from 1973 where he coined the term "acoustic design". Murray-Schaffer's text is written in a somehow pompous style underlining the purity of the Hi-Fi soundscapes (that is having a positive signal-to-noise ratio) to be heard in nature, versus the dense Low-Fi noise pollution of mechanical sounds of the industrialized world. Moreover, Volcler notates the ambivalence created by Murray-Schaffer when using a technologically connotated concept (Hi-Fi) to speak about the natural world, as well as his problematic position of defining a "better" listening, that is to say, another duality implying right and wrong ways of listening. This aspect is emphasized by Murray-Schaffer's ideological and somehow elitist position as a composer defending a righteous listening while excluding other possibilities of listening and reflecting sound. Even if problematic, Murray-Schafer invented the terms of soundscapes and acoustic design, thus laying solid foundations to develop discourses around sound and listening. We then moved to a James Lastra's text *Film and the Wagnerian aspiration* focusing the history of the senses and the analysis of sound design in a specific scene from *Apocalypse Now* melting war noises with Richard Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* to illustrate a massacre of people in a Vietnamese village by the American army during Vietnam War. The use of immersive and elaborated sound design (Apocalypse Now is the first film made in quadrophony) coupled to Coppola's cinematography triggers an audio-visual show creating a spectacular and immersive sensory experience: The highly connotated use of Wagner's music diffused by the speakers mounted directly on the helicopters of the U.S Army propagate a sonic terror melting Wagner's epic composition with the hubbub of the machine guns, napalm bomb blasts and menacing rotor drones. Lastra further quotes Walter Benjamin stating that mankind can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic-pleasure. Even if possibly offering a realistic and critical perspective on the horror of war, that scene of Apocalypse Now underlines the ambivalence of the spectacular use of audio-visual techniques to trigger emotion and sensation. Thus, the movie could serve as a reflection on the meaning of technology, spectacle and the politics of sensory experiences. The aestheticization of different emotions and sensations in filmic context has indeed a history and is often combined to specific techniques to influence the subject-spectator. The over-orchestrated score or the full-on immersive sonic experience to be heard in many mainstream block busters combined to state-of-the-art movie theatres concretises a continuity of the history of the senses and specific politics of emotion and sensation present nowadays in the industries of entertainment possibly fetichizing audio-visual technology.
We then watched a scene from Robert Bresson "A man escaped" from 1956. In that work, the choices made by the director concerning the use of sound in the film are radically different than Walter Murch's implementation of sound design. The chosen scene features the main character having just managed to escape jail by climbing the wall of the prison he was being retained in, as he needs to assassinate a guard before being able to disappear in the darkness of the night. The use of the sound in this scene (like in the whole movie) is reduced, ascetic

and realistic: using no music at all to enhance the dramatic action, one hears the steps of the guard while the main character hides behind a wall waiting for the right moment to assassinate him. When he finally does so, the camera doesn't show us the murder, but the noise of a nearby passing train covering the guard's death rattle and making the unreeling of the action very clear for the spectator. The realistic albeit minimal use of sound permits to create tension while leaving room for auditory imagination through a reduced artistic gesture. Suggesting more than showing everything is the choice made by Bresson in using sound resulting in an artwork neither spectacular nor overloading the sensory experience.
Departing from the sound design in films, Juliette Volcler then demonstrated actual usages of sound in marketing and public spaces and the increasing importance of the auditory dimensions within these realms. In Paris underground for instance, the sound of transport electronic ticket and card scanned at control check points emit a "nice" consonant tone when valid and an "ugly" dissonant one when invalid. By doing so, the sound encourages the flux of people creating a homogeneous fluid rhythm of the mass generating regular and repetitive consonant sounds. In such a situation, a "bad" subject is immediately signalised when emitting a dissonant tone at the check point that perturbs the "harmonious" flow of people. In another example brought by Volcler, the city of Santander in Spain has been a model of Smart City, installing myriads of audio captors in public spaces to collect data and monitor different aspects of the city's management. We watched a short excerpt of the movie "Minority Report" (based on a Philipp K. Dick novel depicting a Precrime police unit able to anticipate criminal behaviours) exemplifying this aspect: The main character enters a Gant store while being tracked by facial recognition offering different targeted products to the character. In another instance, specific directional loudspeakers beam targeted sonic advertising like a "sonic shower" triggering a subliminal voice audible only by a subject nearby a specific product in a supermarket. These examples illustrate a representation of the smart city where public spaces are invaded by audio-visual technologies melting marketing, surveillance and control.

The last session of the seminar named "Sonic Turn: ephemeral polyphonies" welcomed Salomé Voegelin as a guest. Salomé Voegelin has been developing productive concepts and positions to think sound and listening among which "Sonic Sensibility" that gave its title to this seminar. We first discussed a text by Michael Eng "The Sonic Turn and Theory's Affective Call" somehow underlining the paradoxical perspective of sound (and music) within the history of western philosophy. The text addresses, among other points, that philosophical speculation is mostly based on representation *("promising to bring an object into view")* making a real sonic turn (or sonic materialism) only possible when discarding theoretical perspectives that are somehow always prisoner of representation. Moreover, the text underlines that philosophy posits sound as what lies outside of philosophy and is somehow difficult to conceptualize because of its inherent externality. The second text we discussed approached the concept of acoustemology (an acoustic epistemology) through the work of Steven Feld working in the field of anthropology. This text offers the concept of acoustemology to think relations to non-humans (relational ontology) following the experience of the author within the Bosawi people in Papua New Guinea and their ways to understand the complex ecosystems they live in through their relational attunements to all living beings. While concretely listening on the field, Acoustemology permits possible inter-relational qualities of sound through a concrete practice of situated listening. The last text from the "Force of listening" by Lucia Farinati and Claudia Frith served as a discussion to close the seminar and addresses Sonic Sensibility from the perspective of collective listening. We imagined collective

listening as possible and ephemeral polyphonies, like a choir, to reflect our existence and our world sonically. Some mentioned this could be achieved through harmony, some underlined collective noise and dissonance as a social practice, thus bringing the last echoes of a problematic and anthropocentric dichotomy between Apollonian and Dionysian perspectives…

The seminar didn't offer any definitive answers but more so raised questions while approaching sound and listening as points of departure and arrival to reflect the past and present world. Sonic sensibilities might indeed help to create potentialities to think heterogeneous forms of sonic imaginations resulting in manifold and fragile artistic and scientific practices.

Antoine Chessex, June 2019

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