
STUDENT ARTICLE

The exploitation of ‘tangible ghosts’: conjectures on soundscape recording and its reappropriation in sound art

JOHN LEVACK DREVER

Research, Performance Technology Centre, Dartington College of Arts, Totnes, Devon TQ9 6EJ, UK
E-mail: j.drever@dartington.ac.uk Fax: +44 (0)1803 863569

As if the (terrified) Photographer must exert himself to the utmost to keep the Photograph from becoming Death. But I, already an object, I do not fight. (Barthes 1988: 14)

Perhaps this is the ultimate way of playing with reality. (Baudrillard 1997: 38)

Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. (Benjamin 1992: 217)

This paper is born out of my experience as an electroacoustic composer/sound artist and consumer, who passionately engages in the procurement, employment and exchange of soundscape recordings:¹ an ambivalent engagement which is aesthetically rewarding, yet on further reflection deeply unsettling. The aim of this paper is to question and explore why this ostensibly benign and increasingly common procedure (i.e. the routine of soundscape recording/sampling/abstracting, editing, retouching, transforming, mixing, recontextualising . . .) may result in a durable confrontation with ‘terror’ accompanied by ethical compromise. To articulate a personal and intuitive response, I will refer to critical writings on photography to illuminate sound (i.e. utilising the photograph as a counterpoint to the sonic record). I will be focusing in particular on the recording and the reappropriation² of human utterance in electroacoustic music, as it is probably the most intimate, as well as familiar, sonic material to humans. You cannot escape from your own voice.

Today’s digital audio media (including portable/affordable/discrete recorders and microphones, telescopic and microscopic microphones, scanners, satellites, the Internet, and so on . . .) facilitates an unprecedented access to a vast palate of soundscapes,

spanning the microscopic to the cosmic. Digitally mediated data may yield a greater resemblance to the object represented, compared to that produced by other media, as they possess the potential to be instantaneously and perfectly (i.e. without loss of generation) reproduced throughout the world at any time, rendering actuality a phantasmic contagion. The predicament that faces us – at this stage of technological development – is that our sonic emanations may at any time be recorded by transparent media. The transcription onto such media is open to interpolation as well as usurpation, and consequently may be projected to a multiplicity of locations, possibly without our awareness or consent, in ‘real time’ or otherwise – ‘there is always a camera hidden somewhere’ (Baudrillard 1997: 19). These media empower me as a sound artist, confirming me as ‘monarch of all I survey’; whilst as a digital artist’s subject, I am forced to relinquish the imprint or transference of my persona, and its concomitant associations, onto that media. Unfortunately for many (and fortunately for few), Foucault was not mistaken when he presciently declared: ‘Our society is not one of spectacle but of surveillance.’ (Foucault 1977: 217)

I would claim that the prevailing attitude of sound artists to the sonic material which they deal with, whether that be an algorithmic computer synthesis or a ‘real world’ recording of the utmost intimate human experience (e.g. the occasion of one’s own death), is that of a playful commodity: a material object which may be used in whatever way artists desire; valued both for its verisimilitude, equally for its potential to concoct fantastical worlds where any sonic manifestations may collide and mutate. There is rarely an evident acknowledgement by sound artists to any essential qualities pertaining to the sound object, or even to its history. Sound artists habitually have little concern that their appropriations may compromise their subject’s sense of identity or may violate their most intimate regions of privacy. They often disregard their capacity to render a personal or sacred object banal in their art. Moreover, they disregard the fact that their actions increase a public (possibly

¹ ‘Soundscape’ denotes ‘any acoustic field of study’ (Schafer 1994: 7); however, in this context I wish to focus on acoustic fields which have a particular social or cultural significance.

² ‘To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed.’ (Sontag 1984: 4) Thus it is appropriated again when employed in sound art.

false) awareness of ‘constant’ sonic surveillance. An everyday sound event, once digitally mediated, is transformed into a vehicle for artists’ articulations. The subject’s persona is rendered, by the act of appropriation, into a ventriloquist’s dummy, communicating artists’ messages as opposed to the subject’s utterance. Digital sound is understood as merely an illusion of the object represented, reduced to a series of binary digits, thus leaving the consumer’s conscience free of complicity in exploitation and manipulation of the object that has been recorded. Such attitudes have been fuelled by Luigi Russolo’s, Edgard Varèse’s and John Cage’s polemical call: ‘Let all sounds be equal!’, equally by Pierre Schaeffer’s aesthetic of *écoute réduite*, where the artist is required to put history in brackets, reading sound as a self-referential entity, where spectrums of frequency and amplitude fluctuate over time.

Photography, since its inception, has been interpreted as a trace, echo or imprint of the object it represents. Enterprisingly, Daguerre, on advertising his new invention, claimed: ‘The daguerreotype is not merely an instrument which serves to draw nature... [it] gives her the power to reproduce herself.’ (Tagg 1988: 41)

Many believe the camera has the facility to rob the human soul, quite literally, as well as metaphorically. John Grierson, the Scottish film-maker warns: ‘You may take a man’s soul away by taking a picture of him. You may take a part of his privacy away.’ (Carpenter 1976: 149)

In contemporary Cyprus, for example, there is a tradition of using photographs of patients for treatment, rather than direct contact with them. It is often forbidden to photograph memorial photographs on display in Buddhist temples, as it is believed that this may interfere with the spirits. Baudrillard displaces notions of representation in photography further; articulating his experience as a practising photographer he remarks:

...it is a process of capturing things, because objects are themselves captivating. It’s almost like trapping things – like trying to catch the primitive dimension of the object, as opposed to the secondary dimension of the subject and the whole domain of representation. It’s the immanent presence of the object, rather than the representation of the subject. (Baudrillard 1997: 33)

Because of the camera’s mechanical nature, the photograph is seen to have a greater independence from the ‘author’ compared to, for example, figurative painting or writing. Baudrillard is fascinated by the objective attributes of the photograph which he implies the painting does not possess:

The objective magic of the photograph – a quite different aesthetic form to that of painting –

derives from the fact that the object has done all the work. (Baudrillard 1997: 30)

He goes on to compare photography to writing:

By contrast, in writing, it is the subjective dimension which prevails, which guides interpretation, and so on, whereas in photography the objective dimension is presented in all its otherness, and imposes its otherness. (Baudrillard 1997: 33)

In Barthes’ introspective meditation on photography, *Camera Lucida*, he associates photography with resurrection. He writes:

Photography has something to do with resurrection: might we not say of photography what the Byzantines said of the image of Christ which impregnated St. Veronica’s napkin that it was not made by the hand of man, ...? (Barthes 1988: 82)

Through the direct nature of the photographic medium, Barthes feels an intimate contact with the object photographed:

A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed. (Barthes 1988: 81)

In his pivotal essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin develops a relationship between the magician/surgeon and the painter/cameraman:

The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient’s body. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself... The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient’s body... at the decisive moment [the surgeon] abstains from facing the patient man to man... The painter maintains in his work at a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. (Benjamin 1992: 226–7)

Due to photography’s often realist interpretation, it is the proximity to the object it represents that is its ‘pull’ – what Benjamin refers to as the ‘aura’ of authenticity – however illusory that may in fact be. The more abstracted or derealised the representation may become for the reader, the less the efficacy of the photograph’s ‘pull’.

The photograph has often been aligned with notions of death, as it may resemble an actuality fixed, petrified, frozen. As well as representing death, the photograph also points to our own death, the transience of life, and triggers memories of the dead.

Susan Sontag writes: 'All photographs are *memento mori*.' (Sontag 1984: 15)

All the cited thoughts above, on and around photography, are pertinent to recorded sound and its reappropriation in sound art in the digital domain. Indeed, in my opinion, they are even more pertinent to this medium than they are to photography. A photograph chemically reduces and freezes an image of an instant of three-dimensional (3D) environment onto a flat surface; whereas, although dislocated, when sound is generated by a loudspeaker, its presence is still a physically haptic experience, as the fluctuating air pressure impacts on one's body. Loudspeakers may be concealed to the eye, rendering a recording a semblance of the 'real', which may in turn penetrate deeply into the psyche. In anamistic cultures there is a common understanding that, if an object sounds, it is sufficient evidence to acknowledge that it is animate; if it does not sound, it implies that the object is dead. Perhaps we may consider the projection of recorded sound as reanimation or transposition of sound into a new time and space. We could consider the sound artist as animator, master over life and death, time and space, rather than taxidermist, artist of slight-of-hand illusion.

Morton Feldman heard electronically mediated and recorded sound in another way. In his composition, *Three Voices for Joan La Barbara*, a work for two prerecorded voices and one live voice, he regarded the loudspeakers as tombstones, the two prerecorded voices of Joan as dead, and the one live voice of Joan as animate.

The anthropologist Edmund Carpenter names this process of psychic disembodiment and transportation by photographic and phonographic media as 'angelisation' (Carpenter 1976: 11), reading the record(ing) as transference of spirit.

When a sonic recording of an actuality becomes dislocated from its origins – no longer *in situ* – transported to alien locations, it is recontextualised, physically and psychically transformed, creating new dialogues between itself and its surrounding resonating and signifying environment. The artists' authority dictates what will and will not be included in this fabricated soundscape; filtering through, or imposing, their own inherent or intended ideologies and systems of representation over the soundscape. They inscribe themselves deeply into the 'web' of the soundscape and, analogous to Benjamin's model, 'abstain from facing the patient man to man'. (Benjamin 1992: 226–7)

This imperialistic paradigm must surely have deep ramifications on a culture whose 'real is read through representation, and representation is read through the real' (Phelan 1993: 1). Furthermore, in Philip Auslander's opinion: 'We live in a cultural economy [which] privileges the mediatised and marginalises the

live.' (Auslander 1997: 51) In the words of Carpenter: 'Pure spirit now takes the precedence over spirit in flesh.' (Carpenter 1976: 11) Here are examples of two of Carpenter's pertinent anecdotes to demonstrate this point:

Some years ago in New Jersey, a mad sniper killed thirteen people then barricaded himself in a house while he shot it out with the police. An enterprising reporter found out the phone number of the house and called. The killer put down his rifle and answered the phone. 'What is it?' he asked. 'I'm busy.' (Carpenter 1976: 12)

Among the Ojibwa Indians, young people eagerly listen to tape recordings of their grandparents' stories, though they don't want to listen to their grandparents telling the same stories in person. (Carpenter 1976: 12)

These familiar examples clearly demonstrate the somewhat irrational, fetishistic manner in which we regard electronic media, and the extraordinary power they have over our minds.

'Throughout New Guinea,' Carpenter writes, 'a sorcerer who possesses any part of his victim, anything once him – hair clippings, footprints, etc. – has him at his mercy.' (Carpenter 1976: 149) How does this axiom relate to the prevailing power of today's digital media?

Consider, for example, the complex correspondence of individuals' perceived identity to their recognition of their own schizophrenic³ voices within an electroacoustic work. The composer and specialist in acoustic communication and acoustic ecology, Barry Truax, writes:

For acoustic communication, the significance of the voice is that, first of all, its production is a reflection of the whole person, and that secondly, sound making is a primary means of communication by which the person's concept of self and relationships to others, including the environment, are established. (Truax 1984: 28)

Is it artists' responsibility to interfere or intervene in another's 'concept of self' and their 'relationships to others' and 'the environment'?

Bob Ostertag's sonic work *Sooner or Later* draws from two sources of sound material: Fred Frith on guitar and a field recording of a young boy from El Salvador, who is burying his father who has been killed by the National Guard. It is a highly emotive,

³ 'Schizophrenia (Greek: *schizo* = split and *phone* = voice, sound): I first employed this term in *The New Soundscape* to refer to the split between an original sound and its electroacoustic reproduction. Original sounds are tied to the mechanisms that produce them. Electroacoustically reproduced sounds are copies and they may be restated at other times or places.' (Schafer 1994: 273)

classic sonic work. A recording of the boy's extrinsic manifestation of pain is rendered a sound object which functions as a vehicle for Ostertag's aesthetics and politics. Does this work impact on the emotions so effectively through the listener's reading of the original field recording as verisimilitude? Does Ostertag force the boy's spirit to stereophonically relive this pain every time the work is broadcast or projected? Is this a case of Ostertag transforming documentary into fiction: trivialising, banalising, capitalising? Is our ethical quandary relieved if we find out that the boy, Ostertag's subject, is open to Ostertag's appropriations? In fact, is the boy speaking out to a greater audience through Ostertag's agency? Does Ostertag misrepresent that actuality by digitally manipulating and interpolating it with the velvety tones of Frith, etc . . . ? Does a psychic usurpation equal in complicity the dissemination of an external one in an art work? Does the boy's anonymity in the work imply an allegorical suffering rather than a personal one? Is this moment of suffering a private moment for the boy to endure alone, or a public moment worthy of global exposure? What constitutes private? What constitutes public?

The soundscape work of mine that got me thinking about these issues, *Hippocampus*, is comprised of a soundscape of an environmental recording I took of children playing in a public swimming pool. That recording, which I regard as a form of sonic surveillance, is presented linearly through fluctuating modes of transformation, projecting an intense dream-like meditation. Not until completion of the work did I become aware of the spectre-like quality of the soundscape that I had fabricated through the agency of the medium. For me the potency of the soundscape evoked 'tangible ghosts' (Auster 1988: 10). The voices that I was hearing were dead, yet I was still able to physically feel their energy emanating through the loudspeakers – what I was recognising as the same energy that I had experienced when I first made the recording by the pool.

My subsequent feelings were of disgust, questioning: is exploitation, coupled with misrepresentation of others, the root of my artistic endeavours? The children in the swimming pool had become my ventriloquist dummies. I was now speaking through them. I had aestheticised that original recording, imperialistically inscribing upon it my ideologies with the intention of communicating my narrative on meditation. I soon realised that as a maker of culture I was lacking in a number of key critical questions. Those were: 'How was I representing?' 'Who was I representing?' and 'For whom was I representing?'

I personally find it hard to reconcile my artistic practice, together with the vestiges of my inherited realist readings of the sonic record, sympathising with Barthes as he writes: 'I see only the referent, the

desired object.' (Barthes 1988: 7) However, what is it to compose, if it is not to appropriate and juxtapose objects, concrete and conceptual, from our world; moreover, has not the musician throughout history, and transculturally been grouped with the thief? Perhaps with the proliferation of digital media those realist vestiges in me will decline and I will acknowledge a semantic as well as etymological relationship between '-phony' and 'phoney'. However, at this point in time, my call is for sound artists to recognise a responsibility and sensitivity to the material that they are dealing with; constantly reminding themselves that no one lives in a cultural vacuum, art is not self-contained, and does feedback into society. We must strive for the utmost awareness of our actions' ramifications on society, with our ears and eyes wide open, and to respond appropriately to that awareness. Often there is a need to give something back to an environment; a reciprocal relationship, not simply a one-way plunder. Alan Read mirrors my sentiments and offers a solution as he writes: 'It's not a fair exchange of consciousness at all and that I feel very uncomfortable with. I don't mind them photographing me as long as I've got access to photograph them.' (Read 1997: 86) Of course it is important to remember that the artist cannot dictate how a work will be interpreted by a listener. In the words of Cage: 'Composition, performance, and audition or observation are really different things. They have next to nothing to do with one another.' (Cage 1987: 6) However, this does not relieve the composer from any social responsibility or accountability. I believe the challenge for the sound artist is to be able to deal critically and innovatively with all sounds, hand in hand with a profound sense of compassion for the impact of their work on the social environment.

In the words of Bengt Holmstrand and Henrik Karlsson of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music, from their invitation to *Hör upp! Stockholm Hey Listen! An International Conference on Acoustic Ecology*:

Our point of departure in this endeavour is that sounds are primarily to be regarded not as a problem area but as a positive resource to be used in the best possible way. This makes it natural to work for a rapprochement between the technological, humanistic, humanitarian and artistic aspects of sound and the acoustic environment. The sounds around us should be regarded in the holistic perspective in which ordinary people experience them and should be ascribed the same essential importance as air, light and water. (Holmstrand and Karlsson 1998)

REFERENCES

- Auslander, P. 1997. Against ontology: making distinctions between the live and the mediated. *Performance Research: On Refuge* 2(3). London: Routledge.

- Auster, P. 1988. *The Invention of Solitude*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Barthes, R. 1988. *Camera Lucida*. London: Fontana.
- Baudrillard, J. 1997. *Art and Artefact*. Nicholas Zurbrugg (ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Benjamin, W. 1992. The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. *Illuminations*, pp.211–44. London: Fontana.
- Cage, J. 1987. *Silence: Lectures & Writings*. London: Marion Boyars.
- Carpenter, E. 1976. *Oh, What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me!* St. Albans, Herts: Paladin Books.
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and Punishment*. London: Allen Lane.
- Holmstrand, B., and Karlsson, H. 1998. Invitation *Hör upp! Stockholm Hey Listen!: An Int. Conf. on Acoustic Ecology*. The Royal Swedish Academy of Music.
- Phelan, P. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Read, A. 1997. A–Z: (R–T) A conversation with Iain Sinclair. *Performance Research: On Refuge* 2(3). London: Routledge.
- Schafer, R. M. 1994. *Our Sonic Environment and The Soundscape: the Tuning of the World*. Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books.
- Sontag, S. 1984. *On Photography*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Tagg, J. 1988. *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd.
- Truax, B. 1984. *Acoustic Communication*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

DISCOGRAPHY

- Drever, J. Levack. 1997. *Hippocampus*. Dartington College of Arts.
- Feldman, M. 1989. *Three Voices for Joan La Barbara*. New Albion Records (NA 018 CD).
- Ostertag, B. 1991. *Sooner or Later*. RecRec Music (RecDec 37).