

# SOUNDSCAPE AS DISCURSIVE PRACTICE

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Barry Blesser talks of the “perceptual uncertainty principle”<sup>1</sup> in relation to academic disciplines: either a discipline asks broad questions (real life) without having paradigms that provide numeric answers, or it asks narrow questions (lab science) with paradigms that provide numeric answers but with limited applicability. This paper asks broad questions about soundscape art, a sub-discipline of phonographic art practice.

A word can lead a charmed life. The word *soundscape*, for example, is associated with landscape, a word we generally find to be of aesthetic interest and value in referring to both immediate and mediated phenomena. By means of rhetoric *soundscape* refers to many real immediate sound worlds; urban, rural, public, domestic, microscopic, machine-made to name a few, as well as to the created or composed sound world, the world of mediated sound created by means of technology; by artists, musicians, documentarists, archivists and phonographers, sometimes all rolled into one person. By extension we speak of seascapes, streetscapes, dreamscapes and mindscapes. The list goes on.

I refer to the richness of the word *soundscape* in order to point out its versatility and because one of the aims of this paper is ultimately to contribute to the status and richness of the term.

This paper will look at soundscape as a discursive practice in the context of a specific work of sound art drawn from an immediate, or natural, soundscape; that of Seville’s streets during the processions of Semana Santa or Holy Week. By means of multiple perspective recordings carried out on the streets, a mediated soundscape is created for presentation over various configurations of loudspeakers using digital technology. In the process of creating the work both the immediate and the mediated soundscapes became objects of research with their own separate bundle of problems.

The discussion will focus on how meaning is constructed through the appropriation and manipulation of phonographic forms.

Let us put ourselves in the position of listening back to a recording or representation of the sounds occurring at a certain place and time during Semana Santa 2007. Let’s also put ourselves back on to those very streets.

What do we hear? What are we listening for? What do the processional authorities want us to hear? Is there any noise obfuscating the object of our attention? Is this significant, in other words is the noise not noise but signal? What are we, the sound recordists, trying to capture, with what equipment and what are our intentions in doing this? What meaning, if any, arises from the general and specific sounds of the streetscape? I will return to these questions during this discussion.

## 2. THE IMMEDIATE SOUNDSCAPE

In witnessing the processions we hear music; brass bands, drum sections, woodwind and vocal quartets, solo *saeta* singers (*saeta*: a form of improvised flamenco song). We also hear crowds, or rather crowds interacting with processions, changing their sonic behaviour as processions reach points of tension and release. Above and around these textures, which tend to mask very distant sounds, we hear incidental sounds of the street such as bottles being kicked and doors slamming.

As recordists we are specifically listening for sounds or sonic events which are crucial to the flow and management of the processions. The *costaleros*, the body of men carrying the massive *pasos* or floats bearing effigies of Christ, the Virgin and other characters from the Passion, cannot see beyond their feet. They are guided by mechanical and vocal sounds delivered by designated functionaries. The *Nazarenos*, marching caped penitents, have restricted vision because of their headgear. They too rely on aural cues.

Have these ‘functional’ sounds become significant for the audience in such a visually biased event? Has the Church, historically a very shrewd institution in Spain, realised the basic crowd-pulling potential of a good audio-visual show and encouraged the trends, or have ‘the people’ developed these sonic features? The evidence would seem to show that

an element of performance has grafted itself on to the formal structure of the processions. Costaleros exaggerate their shuffle round corners and groan manfully as they hoist floats from a stopping point. The men guiding the floats in or out of a chapel door with literally centimetres to spare give a sparkling performance, generously applauded. Or perhaps this performative element has always been integral to the event. If we were to document and archive the sounds of a specific series of processions, would patterns arise? What, if anything, would be lost, added or modified over time?

The processions wind their way through very old narrow streets and have done so for several centuries. Within the context of the Church wishing to bring itself physically to the people and to occupy public space, are there any sonic advantages in this; in other words does the architecture and topography of the built environment contribute to the desired effect, that of drawing the crowd to closer contemplation and wonder at the images as they pass? Why not adopt the Roman tactic of marching your forces down the largest avenue in full pomp and splendour? In answering these questions it is helpful to consider how the sound of marching bands in movement is perceived in a narrow street with high walls as opposed to a wide open space such as a large city square. Reverberation becomes a performance attribute. In addition, sounds heard from afar, beyond corners and with no visual cue, can heighten tension and anticipation, so much so that we could almost build a typology of such sounds, similar to the photographic typologies of Bernd and Hilla Becher.<sup>2</sup> Crowd warnings (sshhh!) ripple along and around streets. The perception of loudness is unusually hard to anticipate as processions appear suddenly from a street entrance following a complex of echoes and reflections. The sonic effect is as times as powerful as the visual. At moments of 'silence' in one procession, the sounds of one or more different processions are heard arriving from various directions. The experience is at once immersive and directional.

We should be asking at this point if changes in society have led to a decline in respect for the processions. Can this be measured and what, if any, are the sonic features of such social changes? This relates to the matter of signal versus noise. At moments of anticipation an antiphonal chorus of hush signals rises and falls, initiated and then punctuated by a drunken shout or by one half of a mobile phone conversation.

Questions arise relating to the boundaries of institutional, public and private space. The totality of the space occupied by the processions and crowd can be read in many ways, from sonic space as corporate property (belonging to the Church) with a ritualised crowd in participation, to a multiplicity of competing personal and private sonic spaces flowing over and around each other. At times the streetscape is peppered with a micropolyphony of digital ring tones, camera sounds and mobile media devices running through their functions. Functionaries could be heard communicating regularly by mobile phone. As the crowds disperse the question of how much of this is perceived as intrusive seems to linger in the air. But was the streetscape any less 'noisy' in centuries past? Will there ever be a need for PA systems to beat the crowd? Is the hush call a form of social bonding, a ritual within a ritual?

In concluding this section of the paper it is interesting to speculate that we as sound recordists, with our careful choice of street position and our technical/aesthetic agenda, might arguably have been the only people in the crowd listening attentively *to* rather than simply hearing the sonic details aforementioned. In general the processions are highly coded visually from the crowd's viewpoint and more sonically orientated towards the participants. We crossed over the boundary.

Our recordings might well lend weight towards redressing the imbalance observed by Jonathan Sterne when he says "While sound is considered as a unified intellectual problem in some science and engineering fields, it is less developed as an integrated problem in the social and cultural disciplines".<sup>3</sup> Indeed it is our intention that our research contribute as appropriate. Because a very strong link exists between sign and signified, meaning is being represented as accurately as possible and we can certainly 'listen through' our recordings to the real events. But our primary aims are artistic. We have in effect used aesthetic criteria to decide what our eventual audience will listen to and how. We will be appealing to our listeners' audile technique or range of techniques.<sup>4</sup> We have well defined authorial or, to borrow from musical discourse, poetic intentions.

It is in the process and eventual realisation of the work of art that we appropriate and manipulate phonographic forms and establish a multiplicity of discourses; historical, technical, ethnographic, musicological and aesthetic and thereby allow a tapestry of meaning to unfold.

### 3. THE MEDIATED SOUNDSCAPE

#### 3.1 Phonographic Forms

The word *form*, like *soundscape*, has several meanings. Our work has little structural composition at the level of a single 'scene', though much effort has been put into tailoring the recordings and ordering the elements. In short, the 'good bits' have been isolated, equalised, then topped and tailed and set aside to be used as appropriate. The recordings consist of narrative and ambient (another spectrum?) types. Narrativity is evident in the flow of the processions and from our efforts to capture and highlight specific sonic features as they pass. The more ambient recordings resulted where tape was left to run, such as on our rooftop as flocks of swifts and rapacious kites acted out their evening ritual to the immersive accompaniment of processions and incidental street sounds below.

Documentary and archive are often referred to as forms though both are much more, forming the essential core practice of many contemporary artists working with a variety of media. We would consider our approach to be both documentary and archival in nature.

Finally there are presentational forms; radio, CD, DVD, online download, stereo or multi-channel diffusion in the form of installation and headphone installation to name a few. In a recent curated 'exhibition' of sound art, submissions varied from radio pieces containing interviews and ambient soundscapes for headphone listening to 'musicalised' scenes in a quasi-narrative structure for 4 channel playback to raw field recordings for stereo playback. Forms within forms. Success lies in weighing up the versatility of one's content and in choosing appropriate presentational forms. Our synchronised 4 channel recordings afford a range of presentational forms, from straightforward CD or online playback to stereo or multi-channel sound installation in a variety of physical contexts.

Contemporary phonographic work and soundscape work in particular offer a relatively open field with regard to shape and presentational possibilities. The 'lexis' or socialised unit of reading or reception (e.g. the 'piece' in music), is highly flexible.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2 Capturing sound

On the streets we carried out simultaneous recordings from carefully selected locations with a pair of omnidirectional microphones and a stereo mid-side shotgun microphone. One allowed for an almost circular field with exceptional presence, the other allowed the recordist to focus tightly on detail, both on location and in the studio as the mid-side streams were mixed. This allowed us to mix an overall presence and movement of events with a tight focus on specific features.

During 'quiet' periods the omnidirectional microphones captured processions in the distance and their effect on nearby crowds, creating the possibility of new typological forms, sounds from afar, similar to the 'off-frame' of photographic discourse. We were able, to an extent, to emulate in sound what film can do in allowing the listener to believe in a complex arrangement of actions, events and characters over time and what photography can do in concentrating on a few objects.

## 4. APPROPRIATING AND MANIPULATING PHONOGRAPHIC FORMS

We come again to the boundary between immediate and mediated soundscape, to how phonographic forms work on their own terms above and beyond their representational possibilities. Certain forms; the loop, the recontextualised focused excerpt, the balanced immersive 4 channel scene, don't so much record the real, but, as with photography, 'signify and interpret it'.<sup>6</sup> We experience a constant coming and going, a perceptive merging between the interpretative process and the 'listening through' to the event signified.

Rodchenko pointed out that it was a camera lens and not a window which yielded the image.<sup>7</sup> Phonographic presentation has an interesting history with regard to 'laying bare' (the term is Roman Jakobson's) the device. In our case the contrasting sonic qualities afforded by different microphone polarities become a feature of the work, a benefit rather than a hindrance.

Like Rodchenko, we are adopting an aggregate and analytic approach to recording, rather than a unitary synthetic one; we sought out many shots in many circumstances at different times. Typologies emerged which suggested a range of methods and forms of presentation such as miniatures, looping and simultaneous streaming (synchronised or not) in the multi-channel environment.

Our work can be seen as appropriating and developing both documentary and archival phonographic forms. For example, our material is adaptable for radio presentation by casting a sequence of scenes with commentary in narrative form but will also extend 'conventional' documentary practice by presenting several scenes simultaneously in a multi-channel environment. Archives play an important part in the creation of knowledge. As archive our work can create typologies for the purpose of study and contemplation in the hope that meaning crystallises around a central core as the archive grows or is brought to fruition. All these can be considered as forms of soundscape work.

Finally, audile technique has been mentioned as important from the esthetic (*esthetic* - perceptive level and analysis of symbolic forms) or audience's point of view. Audile technique in general (in the so-called developed world) is moving in many different directions at various rates, though this doesn't necessarily signify real progress or development. Although not explicit, there is often a quasi-didactic agenda lurking behind much contemporary phonographic work. We want our listeners to listen or learn to listen in specific ways in order to fully appreciate the work. This in turn dictates how we conceive of and present the work.

Audile technique developed in private spaces.<sup>8</sup> Our choice of galleries and other spaces with desirable acoustic properties as locations for listening to the work is significant. These spaces become listening laboratories where a new 'feel for the game' or *habitus* might be learned. Our practical separation of hearing from other senses, our reconstruction

of acoustic space and our construction of sound as a primary object of audition are traits common to mediate auscultation and sound telegraphy with their roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> In this we are arguably following historical drift.

## 5. THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

How do works of art create meaning? In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Godot never appears, a fact much written about and mulled over by literary analysts. Whatever Beckett intended, Godot begs to be given meaning. Art works beg to be interpreted. Art works will be analysed and dissected from all angles despite themselves.

The discussion of meaning in art is a lengthy and difficult undertaking. We can look at immanent meaning in the sense of 'what's going on here?' and also in the sense of how the work positions itself in the history of art. With reference to the latter, our work can be read variously as:-

- documentary art
- archival art
- soundscape art
- relating to various aesthetic notions, including soundscape as expression.
- relating to film and photography.

We might begin looking at meaning in works of art with high mimetic content. Returning to the issue of representation, Barthes<sup>10</sup> summing up of the photographic work can be applied in part to the phonographic work: "We listen through the presented form to that which is represented, but we must acknowledge the significance of what is left out, how and where it is presented, what has been highlighted and why, what follows what and why." Another view is that of John Tagg, again in relation to photography, but again relevant to phonographic forms: "The indexical nature of the photograph – the causative link between the pre-photographic referent and the sign – is (therefore) highly complex, irreversible, and can guarantee nothing at the level of meaning".<sup>11</sup> Artists thrive on exploring the complexity of the link between referent and sign. The lack of guarantee of meaning is not the same as no meaning at all. Listeners will construct their own meaning, particularly with regard to unity, often independently of an artist's intentions.

Hegel's idea of the art work standing alongside religion and philosophy as a form of self-understanding is a pertinent notion at this point.<sup>12</sup> Through experience of the art work, human beings arrive at knowledge about themselves and the world they inhabit. Art differs from religion and philosophy only in its mode of expression. A work purporting to explore the world in an anthropological or ethnographic sense, therefore, might well offer listeners a deeper understanding of themselves and the world.

Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope pulls the art work into a tight embrace with the self, giving rise to meaning. Bakhtin's premise is that the self is never autonomous, but always exists in a nexus of formative relations with persons, places or events. A chronotope is a space/time (or several such constructs) unique to every work (this does however raise the question "what is the work?"). Chronotopic motifs can function as condensed reminders of particular times and spaces by virtue of their metaphorical resonances.<sup>13</sup> Our presentation of recurrent motifs as variants in a time based medium with high mimetic content and an archival approach to collecting sound sits well with Bakhtin's ideas.

Bakhtin's ideas were developed to elucidate meaning in literature but the idea of reading a work of art as a text has been with us for several decades and is still called upon to add further layers of meaning to a given work. In considering phonographic works as texts we are investigating the "components of sign systems through which meaning is structured and encoded within a work".<sup>14</sup> The point is not to reveal or reflect pre-existing reality but to look at how "signifying systems" impose order and create particular sets of meaning. We are invited to decode phonographic works by treating them as "complex material objects with the ability to create, articulate and sustain meaning".<sup>15</sup>

From a poietic (*poietic* - productive level, process and analysis of symbolic forms) standpoint the creation of spatial meaning is important to artists working with different types of soundscape. At a basic level the very notion of an 'x-scape' implies panorama which implies movement along one or more axes. In Seville we became aware of the spatial characteristics of the immediate soundscape, not only of its sonic qualities (interesting reverberation, good movement between microphones) but also of the dynamic relationships between intimate space, personal space, social space and how these might be rendered at the output stage, i.e. over speakers.<sup>16</sup> What kinds of spaces were we recording and how might these be 'translated'? What happens to spatial perception when you re-diffuse two outdoor stereo recordings, in an interior space, from the exact positions in which they were recorded? What compromises are acceptable?

In common with much soundscape work, our goal is not necessarily to produce mimetic art, but to craft a particular kind of listening experience<sup>17</sup> by slicing up reality to create a new aesthetic realism. Such work wanders into new fields of practice. In our case, where documentary and archival forms are being appropriated, manipulated and rendered sonically, the approach might be labelled as *ethnophonic* or, better, *ethnosonic*.

## 6. SOUNDSCAPE AS DISCURSIVE PRACTICE

Discourse connects people working in the same field. Our practice establishes rhizomatic relations<sup>18</sup> between several fields. Unlike music or photography, there is no established canon for phonographic work bearing in mind that canonical approaches should always be questioned. Lacking the relative certainty of which discourse to adopt we might be end up adopting the “one-medium” discourse. One way to avoid this is to question the very idea of a phonographic or soundscape art as such. John Tagg suggests that in photography there are “differentiated areas of production, differently institutionalized practices, different discourses”.<sup>19</sup> Outside of its historical specifications the medium has no existence. “It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces”.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it is this field we must study in relation to soundscape.

These ideas hold further promise in that we can contrast artistic practice, consciously engaged or not, with the so-called neutrality of radio broadcasting for example. This in turn leads to a consideration of truth as a kind of meaning. Tagg asks the question in relation to photography, again applicable to phonography: “How is photographic discourse related to those privileged discourses harboured in our society and caused to function as true, and the institutions which produce them?”<sup>21</sup>

Referring to Foucault, Tagg stresses that “discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behaviour, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them”.<sup>22</sup>

If soundscape is a discursive practice we need to ask what it does and what are the conditions of its existence. Tagg again: “how does it inflect its context rather than reflect it; how does it animate meaning rather than discover it; where must we be positioned to accept it as real or true, and what are the consequences of doing so?”<sup>23</sup>

So phonographic forms presented as art, including the wide field of soundscape, have their own truth. While many of us have been aware for a long time of the deception involved in received notions of authenticity and truthfulness relating to radio broadcasting, the use of embedded journalists and the rise of ‘reality’ TV have all but dispelled the myth altogether, at least in the minds of the educated sufferer. Artistic uses of phonographic forms remain one of the few bulwarks of resistance against media saturation. The forms we choose are not wholly determined by commercial considerations and will often run counter to current consumer driven trends. Unlike photography, which struggles against corporate (mis-)appropriation, phonography and, more specifically, soundscape works of art still have much to contribute towards critical discourse.

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