

‘the grain of the auditory field’

Kim Cascone

“The sound of the escalator's motor had become indistinct, although I could still feel a faint rhythm transmitted through the steps, which I assumed were caused as the links of the chain that drew me upward were engaged by the sprockets at either end; and the sounds of the lobby, too, were blurred and assimilated into a universal lobby sound, as if each unitary tock of a secretary's heel were a sharp brush-point touched to a wash-covered watercolor, flaring palely outward.”

- Nicholson Baker – Mezzanine

A Field of Indeterminate Diffusion

While on tour I had a day off to relax and get some errands done. In search of food I wandered over to the local shopping center to have lunch. After buying a sandwich I discovered a large airy atrium space with a water fountain and decided to eat my lunch there. The sound of the water fountain in the large reverberant space created a tranquil and hypnotic environment.

At some point my attention was drawn to a small flock of birds that had somehow managed to get themselves trapped indoors. The birds were frantically flying back and forth searching for a way outside through the glass skylight of the atrium. As the birds became more frenetic the bumping against the glass and bird noises began to draw attention from passers-by. People pointed and expressed their concern for the birds.

After a short time a woman arrived with a large instrument case on wheels. With short bursts of sound she unpacked a harp then set up a music stand and a small chair. After everything was arranged to her liking she opened her music book and proceeded to play the harp.

I closed my eyes and listened to this chance mix of water fountain, skittish birds and lilting harp melody poking through the waves of din made by people talking and walking from shop to shop.

By tuning my attention to the individual sounds within the atrium's field my lunchtime break was transformed into an impromptu field diffusion.

Nature in Her Manner of Operation

Everyday auditory fields are complex aggregations, pools of sound, local and asynchronous interlocking fields of cyclic patterns; loosely intersecting, meshing and mixing into a contiguous background. The local habits and routines of people fuse into a rhythmic din, a tapestry woven from minute activities. Sounds are shaped into a seemingly random structure; we hear but don't listen to it.

Each smaller zone of noise forms an aural or auditory field that we circumscribe with a perceptual horizon. If we were able to zoom out and see an acoustic map we would see many smaller fields intersecting with one another. There are no acoustic walls or boundaries in an open space. We store these structures as acoustic mementos or snapshots in time.

Our Gilded Frames

Our society and culture, fueled by commodity fetishism, trains us to continually frame the media around us. This frame organizes media into packages that conform to our expectations: this is a pop song package, that is a music video package, this is an advertising package, etc. The package acts as a locus in a web of cultural references that helps us navigate meaning. We see and hear through layers of mediating abstractions, where content and meaning are leached from culture. Through this frame the media directs our attention via a sequence of expertly crafted images and sounds. We see a specific advertisement during a sit-com on television as a result of researched demographic analysis. Pictures on the news are selected to increase market share for a television channel.

This act of directed attention instills a desire to *make things fit*, to conform the world to our expectations. When something in the parade of sound and images doesn't fit we become uncomfortable and filter it out. As a result, by rejecting the things that don't fit we end up reducing the dimensionality and complexity of everyday life.

This frame, installed by media, constantly reinforces our need to control nature and in turn blinds us to the “grain” of the world around us.

Grain, Aura and Spectacle

Once we escape the tyranny of directed attention and remove our frame we find ourselves cast adrift in the meshing and mixing of indeterminate sounds forming a flux-field of energy, a tapestry of interwoven routines, conspiring to ignite the soul or grain of a place. Grain is the ineffable and sometimes inexplicable quality that infuses a place; a transcendental atmospheric sum greater than its parts.

Grain radiates outward from a place's intangible core its inner mystery casting an aura that simultaneously identifies and separates one place from another. Grain doesn't communicate so much as induce sympathetic vibrations in the listener, completing an inductive circuit through which energy is transferred. When we allow this energy to flow through us we create meaning and are able to perceive the grain of an auditory field.

If “creating new circuits in art means creating them in the brain, too¹,” then when we activate these circuits we allow the grain to come forward.

Stealing the Soul

If we are lucky, at some point the grain transports us via a cross of sensations that deepens us or adds to the quality of our lives. Eventually we want to share that transcendental feeling with others.

So, we pull out a high-quality microphone and a portable recorder and record the field. We are careful to point the microphones in the right direction using the best mic configuration while keeping the level of the signal from overloading the recorder's inputs to ensure an accurate documentation of the auditory field.

Once we have it stored digitally we bring it back to our studio and listen to it on professional speakers. What we hear is a thin and flat sounding version of that transcendental environment we recorded. Even

1 Gilles Deleuze, Negotiations

with technically sophisticated equipment, what we record will always be a mere simulacra of that place.

By recording a field we steal its soul, we lose the grain.

Return to Soundscapes

'the meta designer creates context, not content' – Gene Youngblood

The practice of diffusing field recordings in the context of a performance space also leeches them of their grain.

The issue of performing field recordings is not new, and it doesn't warrant finding a new solution, for some composers have come close. We only need look to certain disciples of R. Murray Schafer and John Cage to find a couple of interesting solutions to this problem. By diffusing field recordings in nontraditional spaces, such as caves or forests, they inject sounds directly into the field itself, not by trying to recreate it virtually in a conventional performance space.

The examples of Schafer or Cage are somewhat problematic in that neither of them truly let sounds be themselves. Schafer shaped many of his field recordings in the studio with musical structure while Cage framed his indeterminacy in a performance context. While neither offered perfect solutions, both helped to chip away at the problem leaving those of us working today to pick up the thread and continue honing their solutions.

In an auditory field, people are free to listen to whatever they turn their attention to. Their listening is non-directed, their attention is free to roam, allowing them to take an active part in the creation of meaning by resurrecting the grain of the field. In this way the listener enters a non-linear, non-directed mode of reception.

By bringing sounds into an unbracketed auditory field we can let sounds be themselves and better foreground the grain.

The Auditory Field is not Music

Like photographers, field recordists record the world around them and transform the mundane into the sublime by editing and processing.

This transformation occurs via bracketing and foregrounding, turning a bland everyday auditory field into something worthy of our attention. Often times during this transformative stage the composer attempts to create grain through editing and audio effects. In an essay, which influenced John Cage, titled “Primitive Mentality,” Ananda K. Coomaraswamy writes, “the effect of European influence has led the artist not to imitate nature in her manner of operation, but simply to imitate nature in her appearances.”

From Musique Concret to the current practice of Phonography composers working with field recordings organize them into musical structures, imparting a lurking narrative to them. The composer attempts to 'say something,' to transmit meaning through a sequence of selected sounds they've recorded. Some composers refer to this directed attention as a “cinema for the ears.”

On the other hand, Cage wanted "to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories of expressions of human sentiments"¹ and used chance and indeterminacy as a way of de-structuring his compositions.

The Performance Space

The performance space is a social construct born from intent and expectation. It can also be regarded as a window in time in which something occurs.

The physical stage mimics the larger social frame as it is a frame itself and holds an imaginary 'glass wall' separating the audience from the performer. In order for this exchange to proceed smoothly it is facilitated by rules, conventions and scripts.

The space is lit in such a way that the audience's attention is focused on the performer behind the imaginary glass wall. Since the performer is featured as the center of attention, the rank of authority (author) is then conferred onto them. Our attention is directed inside this bracketed space, preventing distractions and filtering out noise from the street.

Our experience is that “concert time” passes in a linear manner, thus activating a linear mode of listening. Using conventional time markers, a piece ends, applause ensues, a new piece starts, intermission follows, and an encore signals yet a little more music before the evening comes to a close.

By diffusing field recordings in a performance space, the complex and multi-dimensional nature of an indeterminate field collapses into a stereo plane or better yet can be compared to two small portholes or peepholes for a voyeur. This linear mode of reception has evolved over the years and consequently shaped much of the music we consume today. But the auditory field is not a performance space, a linear bracketing of time and space. It is non-linear, indeterminate and by attempting to frame it using conventional structures used in musical performance its dimensionality is reduced and the grain is leached from it.

Resurrecting the Field

Much of my thinking about grain and auditory fields was radically stimulated by a book by Tom McCarthy, titled, “Remainder,” in which the protagonist goes to great lengths and expense to recreate an apartment building he conjures from memory while staring at a crack in a plaster wall during a reverie. The building and the activities of its residents were painstakingly adjusted, its details perfected, until they created the desired effect of inducing a state of reverie, until the grain came out.

In developing an approach to diffusing field recordings outside of a performance space I filtered the historical work of soundscape artists through the McCarthy book. This led to the idea of creating a new field in an existing field by diffusing sounds already present or by adding new unexpected sounds such as the flocking birds. By using an array of speakers placed in strategic positions within a field one could diffuse sounds and move them in space.

The idea of diffusing one space inside another is a powerful idea worthy of pursuit but the problem still exists of how to prevent the bracketing of it as a cultural event being orchestrated by sound artists.

1 John Cage, Silence

One solution would be to borrow from the practice of acousmatic diffusion and diminish the role of the artist by physically locating them somewhere where they wouldn't be visible. Another way to prevent bracketing is to not announce it as an event with a location and start time. This way the people who visit the space would be in their usual non-linear listening mode for that environment and receive any sounds heard as being part of the soundscape.

Imagine the atrium space I described earlier if there were a speaker system set up and just the sounds of the flocking birds and the harpist were diffused. The sounds would be loud enough to mix with the general background but since there were no visual objects creating those sounds they would recede into the background for most people. For others it might produce a feeling of ostrananie or dissociation.

But firstly it is important to try and locate the grain of a space or think of some way that it can be brought out by working with the natural acoustics, introducing foreign sounds, amplifying small sounds already in the space but inaudible or working with bigger sounds that have no visual correlation.

If the growing movement of field recording makes its focus the sublimity of the auditory field then work needs to progress on not falling into formulaic formats because they are standard and easy to interface with. If field recording is to escape the ghetto of sound souvenir or audio puzzle then break the habits which end up relying on technology to make it interesting.

Auditory fields are not music and by trying to present them as such we end up depleting them of their grain and deadening their soul, leaving little of value to share with the listener.

Bibliography

Augoyard, Jean François and Torgue, Henry. *Sonic Experience: A Guide To Everyday Sounds*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005.

Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Noonday Press, 1977.

Blessner, Barry and Salter, Linda-Ruth. *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?: Experiencing Aural Architecture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.

Cage, John. *Silence*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Negotiations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Idhe, Don. *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Rhythmanalysis*. New York: Continuum Books, 2004.

McCarthy, Tom. *Remainder*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007.

Schafer, R. Murray. *The Tuning of the World: Toward a Theory of Soundscape Design* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980.