

Listening to/against soundscapes together: methodological considerations on conducting research with soundwalking publics.

The aim of this paper is to present the research activities I have participated in and organised at the University of Edinburgh during the second semester of the academic year 2015/2016. The following examples can be understood and studied in the logic of the “parasites” or “third spaces” as has been suggested by Marcus. (Marcus 2012), which I use in order to investigate how it is to listen together and the concept of soundscape in relation to my own PhD research.

During Innovative Learning Week 2016 (ILW), I organised, together with Akoo-o group of artists (<https://akoocollective.wordpress.com/>), a group I have been following for the past year in Athens and elsewhere, a workshop titled *The Impossible Inaudible Soundwalk*. This workshop was part of the ‘Silence, Narrative and the Intimacy of the City’ workshop symposium (<http://urbanemptiness.org/actions/february-2016-edinburgh/>); we invited participants to question the conceptions of silence and noise and discuss the idea of urban voids and emptiness through collaboration, application of innovative methodologies and the use of locative media to produce an intervention of space with audio means. Participants, who came from various disciplines such as sound design, digital composition, architecture and visual anthropology, were not only students, but also locals.

In the three days of the workshop we attempted a historical and aesthetic approach regarding both walking and the limits between music, sound art and the study of soundscape. Participants were introduced to field recording techniques, during a field-based expedition of walking, listening and recording in the form of a listening walk. Moreover, processing of sonic data in the lab (soundscape composition, sound design), as well as reproduction and sound composition upon the map of the city in order to create a geo-located composition for a specific area. The platform we used for creating the soundwalk is noTours (<http://www.notours.org/>), an open-source software platform for creating site-specific and interactive artworks with the use of locative media technology, developed by escoitar.org. Our goal was to create a sound map of an area that is understood as an ‘urban void’ and to compose a soundwalk that would augment the sensorial dimensions of the experience of the city for participants and listeners.

The second example is the work I did this semester with master's students from Design and Digital Media, Sound Design, Digital Composition and Performance and other programmes from across Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) as supervisor of their Digital Media Studio Project course (DMSP). DMSP is a course available to students from the aforementioned master's programmes; they are divided into group of 6-8 people and they work collaboratively on producing a digital media project (installation, application, website, etc.).

The title of our project was Data Flâneurs¹. Inspired by the flâneur – a concept of great cultural significance when speaking about walking in the city – the group explored a series of everyday, socio-political and cultural-oriented activities through the practice of walking, listening and recording these activities with a focus on sound. Drawing on sound studies, sound art and walking as research method and artistic practice, the aim has been to develop a *new spatio-sensorial vocabulary* (Psarras 2013), exploring the notion of 'augmented aurality'. A detailed description with all the activities, research, tests and final product can be found in the project's blog (<https://dmsp.digital.eca.ed.ac.uk/blog/dataflaneurs2016/>), which I urged them to imbue with content regularly, in the form of a diary.

After various readings, research, discussions, brainstorming sessions, tests, disappointments and tensions, the group decided that for the final project they would develop a prototype web and mobile phone application that simulates the experience of a soundwalk for the user. This prototype application is a map-based sound sharing, collecting and editing mobile application where “users can add sounds and listen to them, remix them on the map, simulating the soundwalk experience and also hunt sounds. When users are moving, the dots which represent the different sounds follow them. In the meantime, they can feel the different layers of sound. Individuals can choose different map styles and then they can add sound in the map. They can also leave or check a comment to the uploader as a feedback when listening to the sound” (<https://dmsp.digital.eca.ed.ac.uk/blog/dataflaneurs2016/2016/04/20/submission-2-introduction/>).

¹ The Data Flâneurs team is: Caleb Abbott, Lewis Jones, Shuwen Ye, Shang Gao, Siyang Yu and Rong Wang.

Soundtag, which was the name they came up with, aims to shift the focus from the visual to the aural by inviting users to rethink their experience of place through social and playful sonic interactions. This listening experience was two-fold since users were encouraged to experience the available soundwalks both indoors (i.e. the simulation on the computer/phone screen with the use of the application) and also the “real” soundwalk outdoors with their mobile devices, which was again installed using noTours platform. The two sound designers of the group chose two short routes close to Alison House/Nicolson Square where the music department is located to augment sonically. The remaining 4 members of the group focused on the development of the web and mobile prototype application. Research and decisions were collaborative.

Both examples/experimental practices draw on George Marcus’ concept of para-ethnography (Holmes and Marcus 2008; Marcus 2010; 2012; 2013) which was developed to capture the reflexive and intellectual practices in contemporary fieldwork contexts. Marcus argues about “the appeal of alternative forms of articulating thinking, ideas, and concepts inside or alongside the challenge of situating and managing the fieldwork process— in ‘third spaces’, archives, studios, labs, ‘para-sites and the like” (Marcus 2012: 430). These para-sites are hybrids between the research report and the ethnographic research itself, an overlapping academic fieldwork space outside conventional notions of the field and fieldwork in contemporary ethnographic projects.

Both projects discussed here are examples of collaborative para-ethnographic practices, in that we not just engaged with participants in collaborative field recording and sound editing processes, but actively trained and urged them to become para-ethnographers, with basic observational and note-taking skills that had the form of field recordings; furthermore, during the process of ‘installing’ the soundwalk through extensive discussions about their experience of place and what sounds they chose to augment this experience in relation to certain places.

In the case of the 3-day ILW workshop, every phase was preceded by lengthy discussions between workshop organisers and participants, while in the case of DMSP, which has been a four month educational project, the goals and learning outcomes were set by the project supervisor from the beginning. My participants, or collaborators as I prefer to

address them, showed interest in the potential of ethnomusicological enquiry, in the way James Leach describes in his ethnography on creativity and kinship in the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea (Leach 2003). My relationships, like his, have developed on this basis to a position where ethnomusicological analysis itself played a significant part in our conversations.

In both examples, it is the creative and collaborative endeavour that lies in the core of my research practice. Collaborative listening and processing of audio material becomes a knowledge-making process, at the same time imbued with and highlighting a variability of meanings. We have been involved in processes of creating – or designing – a new concept of creative collaboration which includes artists, researchers, students and participants. The creative engagement with sound and the combination and innovation with technology has been the basis for constructing a relationship with other people.

As Georgina Born argues, influenced by the work of social anthropologist Alfred Gell, cultural objects that result from creative agency epitomize and mediate social relations (Born 2010: 13). In line with Born, I understand agency as creative invention; soundwalks demand a degree of agency from a listener-participant to complete the composition. The way to claim agency is by engaging into the process of creative collaboration which is understood as a social phenomenon rather than as an individual artistic practice. To quote Leach, “[P]rocess is a creative land” (Leach 2003: 218).

Upon reflecting on this experience, and after conducting (sedentary and walking) interviews with participants, the preliminary data show that these experiments served at least three different purposes. (I) They formed the basis for identifying and discussing artistic practices that contribute into collaborative knowledge production where participants were the “co-creators of desirable futures and the facilitators of knowledge and meaningful practices” (Otto & Smith 2013: 13). (II) They proved a valuable means of obtaining ethnographic insights where the time for more traditional ethnographic fieldwork was limited; and as such it raised critical questions concerning the nature of such insights and the method itself. (III) They served as ways of distributing the perspective during fieldwork, thus challenging a range of conventional ideas about ethnographic research; that is, it rendered ethnographic fieldwork a fundamentally collaborative formation of issues.

These considerations inform my own research on the ways that people listen to/against the soundscape. Going back to my musicological and ethnomusicological training is how I attempt to answer the question of how we listen together. But first I will discuss the term soundscape; its history, complexities, uses and misuses.

Recent cultural-historic scholarship locates listening within the relevant 'auditory culture' or *soundscape* characteristic of an era, society or culture; Scholars are investigating the part that sound plays in the construction of the reality of the world. The term soundscape, coined by Canadian musicologist and composer R. Murray Schafer, refers to "the sonic environment" (Schaffer 1994 [1977]), i.e. the entirety of sounds being audible in a certain region. Soundscape offers the interpretation of a world of things rendered in acoustic forms by drawing attention to the sensory register. The soundscape, in the Schaferian definition, is a conceptual apparatus which designates an acoustic environment that listeners experience as surrounding them in space. For Kelman, who understands the Schaferian notion of the soundscape as carrying ideological and ecological messages about the meaning of sounds and suffused with instructions about how people ought to listen, the problem is that today the term has become ubiquitous: "[I]n its near-ubiquity, the term has come to refer to almost any experience of sound in almost any context" (Kelman 2010: 214). According to Helmreich, "Schafer articulated the soundscape as a sonic version of landscape, an object of contemplation" (Helmreich 2010). In this sense, soundscapes are also things in the world.

Tim Ingold in *'Against Soundscape'* warns about the risk of losing touch with sound in the same way visual studies have lost touch with light. He "suggests that soundscape objectifies sound rather than treating it as experiential" (Helmreich 2010), characterizing it as "a conventional mean to describe the acoustic world that has now outlived its usefulness" (Ingold 2007). Thus he proffers the use of multiple 'scapes' (landscape, soundscape, smellscape, etc.). Voegelin joins Ingold's assertion that the acoustic environment is not really a soundscape in the etymological sense of the word: "it is not a scape, a scenery, a place to look at from afar" (Voegelin 2014: 10), but her consensus with Ingold goes only this far; In Voegelin's phenomenological possibilism which follows Merleau-Ponty's search for a primacy of perception, "[T]he soundscape is then indeed not a slice of

the landscape, as Ingold points out, but it is one slice of all the slices that make up the landscape in its commingling existence” (Voegelin 2014: 45).

Ingold suggests that the landscape is visible; it becomes visual when rendered by techniques such as painting or photography (Ingold 2007). The same stands for the soundscape; it is audible but it must be rendered aural. To make a parallel to the anthropological concept of landscape, as formulated by Hirsch, “[T]here is thus the landscape we initially see and a second landscape which is produced through local practice and which we come to recognise and understand through fieldwork and through ethnographic description and interpretation” (Hirsch 1995: 2), the outcome in both experiments discussed above is a soundscape composition that renders the soundscape aural through field recordings sound editing and sound mapping. It is also the representation, the aesthetic work that frames things within their contexts, inhering in the relation between rendering the foregrounded quotidian experience heard and also sonifying the background slices of gender, of race, of belonging and migration, of space and culture (Voegelin 2014: 46).

After extensive discussions with the DMSP students, on the soundwalks, listening walks, audiowalks and their intricacies, the team devised the term *soundspace* which “refers to the space in which a sound event, or composition takes place via a mobile platform such as Echoes” (<https://dmsp.digital.eca.ed.ac.uk/blog/dataflaneurs2016/2016/02/16/1-test/>). As they have stated in one of the posts in our blog site, “The term *soundspace* intentionally avoids using ‘walk’ as we feel there are many ways a user can navigate through a sound experience”. The group decided to use sound as a means of exploring their own everyday lived experiences, requiring to some extent, “the notion of ‘echoing’ our unique perspectives rather than distancing ourselves from it, and exploring as ‘visitors’ or treating the area as detached (ibid).” Drawing on Feld’s work with the Kaluli people, they focused on studying, as Feld describes them, the “ways sound and sounding link environment, language, and musical experience and expression” (Feld 1994). The aim was to “explore environments and connect with these spaces in new ways” (<https://dmsp.digital.eca.ed.ac.uk/blog/dataflaneurs2016/2016/02/16/1-test/>). In this sense, the soundwalks that were the result in both examples presented above, function as an alternative ‘*dialogic editing*’ which was developed as a methodological tool for producing

an '*acoustemology*', in Feld's words "one's sonic way of knowing and being in the world" (Feld 1996).

In order to conduct research into how we listen to or against the soundscape together, an interdisciplinary methodology is needed for the research of artistic practices in urban spaces that involves mobility and sound. This methodology combines ethnographic tools, soundwalks and soundmaps in the form of a methodological triangulation of participant observation, interviews and experimentation. Traditional ethnographic tools, such as participant observation and multi-sited fieldwork are combined with 'go-along' interviews (Kusenbach 2003), 'conversations in place' (Anderson 2004) and commented city walks (Thibaud 2013). Soundwalks are represented in the form of soundmaps that constitute a creative approach to soundwalking; soundmaps represent the experience of the soundwalk affording augmented experiences for all participants and highlight ways in which people not only reflect on their environments and make them meaningful, but also inhabit and experience them. Such thick maps act as a mode of discovery within the context of social discourses, not unlike the notion of 'thick description' popularised by Clifford Geertz (1994).

Thick maps like thick descriptions are infinitely extensible and participatory, offering, as Sara Cohen argues, "valuable insights into ways in which people describe and remember places, their subjective sense of space and place and also differences between people in terms of their spatial knowledge and understanding" (Cohen 2015: 231). Soundmaps and soundwalks are produced through experimental practices that are hybrid 'para-sites' or 'third spaces' as Marcus described them. This methodology is understood as a *promenadography* (Vermeire & Vermeire 2014: 361), a simultaneous writing and reading of the city with walking and sound as connecting instruments. My goal is to understand these processes of how soundwalkers are engaging into co-operative creative actions that focus on their experience of place through sound and mobility. The anticipated outcome is to construct a creative research process that uses soundwalks and soundmaps to create collaborative sonic improvisations, as part of a socially engaged sound art practice.

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