

The Yorkshire Soundscape Project: multi-disciplinary approaches to a sound artist's experience of landscape through the frameworks of soundscape ecology and composition.

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Abstract

The Yorkshire Soundscape Project was conceived to retrace sounds of an audio archive featuring the Yorkshire Dales and focuses on recording and representation in the search for change in a relatively unthreatened environment. Within the framework of soundscape ecology and composition, through a lens of psychogeography, this is a practice-based case study of a sound artist's experience of landscape through archive, composition, and geopolitics of the 'natural' environment.

The madness (or, arts practice) activated by revisiting and retracing within the eerie English countryside has allowed new perspectives on the practice of composition inspired by archived material. This has given rise to certain questions on the interpretation of the archive through the imagination, and its relevance in a world wired by environmental politics, all set within a pastoral and typically English landscape.

Keywords

Soundscape composition, acoustic ecology, soundscape ecology, Yorkshire dales, music, world soundscape project, archive, audio archive, psychogeography, national parks, geopolitics, nature, electroacoustic, ambisonic, stereo

Introduction

The geological notion of stratigraphy suggests that the appearance of landscape is time layered on top of itself, with some bleeding and cross-sectioning, and not always literally- the perception of stratigraphy is, in some consideration of the cosmos, multi-dimensional. Human civilisation is, therefore, only a blip in terms of geology.

Landscapes, in this sense, are legible; they facilitate lived experience as well as bearing experience itself. However momentary, a mutual influence exists between landscape and its inhabitants, people and non-people.

What the YSP represented in its early stages was a humble yet ambitious intention built on framework of ecology and environmentalism. This became destabilised by the landscapes of the English countryside and its unconscious right underfoot; chasing shadows first-hand and seeking traces of archive material appears to uncover much more than anticipated.

To use the words of Robert Macfarlane, this is an eeriness constituted by 'uncanny forces, part-buried sufferings and contested ownerships'. It's a concept which is 'sceptical of comfortable notions of "dwelling" and "belonging" and of the packaging of the past as "heritage"'. [1] (Macfarlane 2015). A relatable concept if the political undertones are read correctly.

With some peculiar geopolitics, a vastly Tory landscape whereby most of the land is privately owned, that pastoral landscape of the Yorkshire Dales that people seek so much comfort from as British inhabitants and/or tourists, like the rest of the country, is essentially traumatised.

The memory instilled into the English countryside, is one of a wealthy history of power struggles and occult accidents. The countryside gushes out memories of with war, industrial exploitation, psychedelic journeying, and existential realisations (spiritual or otherwise). Traversing it with the right lenses, thought patterns, and intentions, reveals a pervasive sense of madness and awe. Rich and fertile ground for the eyes and ears.

This is not to present some discovery about the presence of ghosts but a minor realisation deeply embedded in the research process highlighting certain connotations of lived experience. Within a construct of rationalism such could be deemed esoteric, counter-cultural, or just non-academic. This is more or less where psychogeography sits within the institution anyway- often tokenistic and vacuous.

That, in researching the Dales within a strict framework of methodologies within academic plateaus, it's easy to ignore the obvious and almost candid possibilities of such methods being performances themselves. Whilst aiming for a project with goals in mind, i.e. the proposal and sticking to it, it became apparent that methodologies were rituals in which work manifests itself and which deserves more attention than basically thought. i.e. it may not all be about results. For some areas of making work, process is imperative.

Reading / Relocating

In 2014 access was gained to the European Tape Collection held at Simon Fraser University; this is an

archive of digitised tape recordings from the research of the World Soundscape Project that took place across Europe for their publications *Five Village Soundscapes* [2] and the latter *European Sound Diary* [3]. Their aim was to extrapolate research about the acoustic environment they had on-going in Vancouver and apply it to generalisations they had about villages in Europe in the 1970s.

Examples of these generalisations of what they called the ‘Traditional European Village’ are:

- *The daily rhythms of a community reflect its social and economic structure*”
- *Strong and cohesive social life – but not so cohesive as to resist curious intruders*
- *A few acoustic signals of distinction*
- *A few unusual vernacular sounds*
- *Some good ambiences to record* [4] (Schafer 77b)

Whilst the primary research focus was within Cembra, Skruv, Bissingen, Lesconil, and Dollar, extensive research and recordings took place in the liminal places including the Yorkshire Dales.

The archive is an extensive collection of field recordings, and handwritten metadata, as well as photographs, climate information, and diary entries. All in all, it represents a diverse collection of bio-, geo-, and anthropophonic sounds from the landscapes of that time.

Using an archive usually involves taking one path down a dichotomy of how its material could or should be interpreted. Going “along” or “against” the grain determines the kind of cultural perspective from which the archive is read and these have radically different outputs according to intentions and accessibility. Contrary to the more customary methods of reading, going against the grain can reveal alternatives to conventional and/or accepted narratives with an archive’s subject matter and context.

In the case of the World Soundscape Project in the Yorkshire Dales, going along the grain would be taking their diverse archive material and accepting it as a truthful representation of the Yorkshire landscape at that time. That the recordings are essentially representative of 1970s ecology in Wensleydale because the content stretches far and wide.

This idea is in line with soundscape research and the early intentions of the Yorkshire Soundscape Project; the whole premise was to delineate a system for comparing soundscapes, recording in the exact locations at the same time of year, but with updated technology, to ultimately deliver some statements about the states of ecological change within the Yorkshire Dales after a 40-year period, with a focus on biodiversity [5]

Listening to the archive presents a very innocent Yorkshire Dales- one of farmers, sheep, and natural horns. It presents a rich diversity of material that was all there but not quite specific enough to qualify as one of the ‘Five

Villages’ [6]. They were obviously busy recording and documenting in some degree but there’s a few things that didn’t add up.

In the early research period, gaps had to be filled within the metadata collection as some precise locations of their recordings just weren’t there, nor their reasons for choosing them. Conversely, in some cases they were even diagrams were drawn so as to localise exactly the positioning of the microphone.

This kind of information was essential in producing effective comparisons. But this metadata needed for recordings of an assumed ecological interest was just missing; recordings such as the dawn chorus or the interval recordings of 4 locations over 24 hours were missing essential information. However, the wind blowing in the court yard of an medieval castle was documented extensively, hand-drawn with surprising accuracy. Furthermore, where missing information could be, there are hilarious notes regarding outtakes and botched-up methodologies.

Going against the grain of the European Tape Collection, would be to suggest that there’s more to the material insofar as it’s a personal approach of a bunch of Canadian composers, with specific interests in mind, who are working on generalisations about A) their idea of European village culture (itself a generalisation) and B) the acoustic environment as a whole- itself arguably based on certain cultural and economic privileges [7]. Both of which arguably derive from aspects of white, western, male correlationism.

In the words of archivist Verne Harris, “we no longer read only with the authenticated...trusted old pair of spectacles. We read instead with an array of lenses.” [8] (Harris 2009). Taking these botched-up writings, tape noise and outtakes as primary interest. Furthermore, sound art’s diversity problem can open alternative channels of interpreting essential acoustic data.

And so, looking back on the research period and listening back to new recordings made on anniversary visits to the recordings sites, there’s a substantial amount of things that didn’t add up, and their methods just aren’t as affable as they could have been (not to mention the contexts and circumstances of the institution in which the project is part of). So instead, this project has taken to considering the European Tape Collection to be the basis of creative work rather than attempting to make more scientific inferences about the environment as a whole- which was admittedly a pompous ambition in its early stages.

Reimagining

Audio archiving is a relatively new movement, in the sense of soundscapes anyway but it has recently been given a large monetary boost in the UK as part of the heritage industry. In years to come there will be a wealth

of resources, physical and online, that document sonic history within oral, musical, taxonomic, and/or ecological ways. Projects such as the British Library Sound Archive [9] (which recently received a lot of funding) and more local sound map initiatives such as Peter Cusack's *Favourite Sounds* [10] show off just some of the on-going and growing handling of the audio archive.

However, interventionism and dada-ism seems kind of lacking in popular circles. Perhaps down to its transient nature [11] sound is taken very seriously by most practitioners, whether it's expositions about the importance of sound in the natural sciences, or the on-going struggle with certain notions of noise and its pollution thereof, or even the purism of electroacoustic music. Each with their own extremities including species extinction, hearing loss, or simply an overbearing visual culture. All of which are indeed vital.

With archives, it's said that "locking away material and preventing change" is counter-intuitive to the creative process, and that "the archive only has legacy through living on." [12]. And one way to allow the ghosts of the WSP to 'live on' is to open it up to celebration and exploitation- perhaps part of the same thing. In the words of Andrew Kötting, this opening up could be:

*"The recuperation of failed visions
The rebirth of forlorn moments
The undermining of the present
The partial recovery of an ill
begotten memory
The attempted resuscitation of a
long gone relative
And
The knackered embrace of a
desperate interloper. [13]*

Or, in other words: 'Rich and fertile ground for the ears and the eyes' [14]. Some of the most evocative work, no matter the medium, is the kind of work that uses archive footage as its main source in composition or concept. In documentary making, it is a powerful tool to bring up the past in ways that it was neither intended or anticipated. Artists such as Andrew Kötting and John Akomfrah have been doing this well as well as expanding their work beyond medium specificity.

Kötting, who's playful approaches to the past completely reignites the imagination and just powerfully criticises the complacent relationship we have to the symbiotic relationship between psyche and geography. For example him and his daughter Eden, by drawing words and pictures such as 'the world is full of shit' on Chapman Brother defacings of Goya etchings [15]; they infuriate the comfortable and evoke humour in what is probably looked down upon in the conservative art world, in what he describes as "pithy titular interventions".

In a similar vein, John Akomfrah, through the sonic and visual metaphors and metonyms, unsettles popular ideas.

In *Vertigo Sea* themes of movement, immigration, and exploitation as he simultaneously shows images of slavery and whale hunting- the brutal abuse that took place across the Atlantic. He exposes essentially racist interpretations and sheds light on the real feelings of dislocation and alienation across the broad spectrum of the natural world. [16].

Furthermore, their work has diverse applications from books to television, from an exhibition of physical and sonic artefacts to huge multi-channel gallery installations.

Conclusion

By listening to archived material against its grain, reengineered by the artist- putting aside all the psychological/philosophical baggage that sound studies carries- the Yorkshire Soundscape Project is considering a fusion that challenges the discourses of truth in soundscape composition, converging techniques from electroacoustic/acousmatic music and documentary making, whilst still remaining faithful to content and place.

The Yorkshire Soundscape Project's accompanying practice contains sonic time lapses of the daily cycles of the landscape, re-imaginings of the sounds of particular landmarks, and phonographic portraits using manipulations such as spatialisation and gestural montage techniques for, fixed-media playback, installations, and live performance.

Shifting through ideas in sound art, cinema and psychogeography, the multi-disciplinarity is one open to interpretation depending on how work appears through technological reproduction- each recording and playback technology bares different aesthetics and representations. Furthermore, the electroacoustic blackbox is imbued with biases from both technology and the recordist/composer.

Work isn't necessarily there to raise awareness about certain ecological features/events and/or persuade people to change their stance on environmentalist discourses- which can often make work very text/information-dependent. Rather, it's an attempt to represent and celebrate, somehow, the eeriness of the English countryside. This eeriness is unique, historically rich, and terrifying, and it can challenge comfortable notions of the landscape in political or social terms. All in ways to create broad outputs for the work, freeing it from conservatism, taking advantage of the multiplicity of art forms, in a growing world of transdisciplinary practice.

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Author Biography

In his early work, Tariq's practice derived from artists' film and video, experimental music, and an angst-driven relationship with bureaucracy in higher education; the lifespan of his work didn't last long nor did it repeat itself.

Tariq is now researching towards a PhD in Music by Composition, and alongside academia he works as an A/V technician, collaborating with varieties of artists and organisations and performs in a variety of ways. All the above appears on national and international levels.