

MIMETIC MACHINES AND THE SENSUOUS SOUNDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

Mimetic Machines and the Sensuous Soundscape: The significance of contact and copy in the relationship between field recording and soundscape.

This paper rethinks how a field recording can be understood in relation to its source, introducing a new angle to the debate on the extent to which field recordings are faithful representations of a discrete soundscape (see Montgomery 2009, Weiss 2009, Kelly 2013 and Ingold 2007). The paper argues that the field recording, whether proposed as a faithful rendering of reality or as a aesthetic, interpretive work, is a mimetic object – a copy of an ‘original’ source deriving power from a “first contact” with its source material. This paper explores a resonance between the field recording and representative objects created in other cultures via anthropologist Michael Taussig’s study of Cuna fetish objects, Mimesis and Alterity

Applying Taussig’s formulation of mimesis, which is drawn from Walter Benjamin and James Frazer’s writings on the subject, I trace a parallel between field recordings and fetish objects to ask 1) How does a field recording share in or take power from what it represents (i.e. the soundscape)? And 2) How does the field recording affect what it is a copy of? Exploring these questions via key works by Peter Cusack and Annea Lockwood I speculate that field recordings are “sensuous mimesis” in excelsis, with the acts of making and listening to field recordings having transformative effects on the soundscape itself, as well as defining the parameters of the field of acoustic ecology.

An acknowledgement - This argument builds on a number of issues raised by John Levack Drever in his essay Sound Fetish Tendencies[1] which I discovered upon completing the first draft of this piece. It was good to know someone else was treading a similar path.

THERE'S NOTHING NATURAL ABOUT FIELD RECORDING

Emily Thompson writes:

“A soundscape, like a landscape, ultimately has more to do with civilization than with nature, and as such, it is constantly under construction and always undergoing

change.[2]”

An observation supported by Edmund Casey, “Like landscapes, they are as much psychical constructs as material ones”[3].

Field recordings are recordings of culture: of opinions, perspectives, meditations and actions on what nature - the physical world - might be. These opinions, perspectives, meditations and actions are what constitute the idea of the soundscape.

Field recordings and soundscapes are functions of each other. As much as the field recording responds to the soundscape, it may be true to say that each new field recording expands and extends, skews and stretches, minute by passing minute, the soundscape itself.

MIMESIS

The main activities of field recording – sound recording and reproduction – are versions of the universal human talent for mimesis – for making copies – a trait that is central to activities as diverse as magic, children’s games, cinema, painting, education and much more. This trait of mimesis runs up through human history from its earliest days, as Walter Benjamin notes of humankind:

“There is perhaps not a single one of her higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role. [4]”

So, we are talking of our mimetic faculty, this ability to imagine, create, or recognise similarity. In his book *Mimesis and Alterity*,[5] a study of the mimetic faculty via an ethnographic case study of the Kuna people of Panama and Colombia, Michael Taussig offers a definition of the mimetic faculty as:

“The nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other.[6]”

This idea of transferring, of becoming of connecting with and ultimately sharing brings us to this question, drawn from Taussig’s introduction:

1) How does a representation share in or take power from the represented?

Taussig notes:

“The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume some of that character and that power.”[7]

So the copy is never entirely distinct from that which it represents,
power channels connect the source and its copy,
sometimes running in two directions,
sometimes only in one.
For us, the field recording is the copy,
the source is the soundscape.

This leads us to a second question:

2) How does the representation affect what it is a representation of?

The copy can affect the source,
and I suggest the field recording,
through its recording and being listening to,
is an affective agent in the constant construction and changing of the soundscape.

THE FIELD RECORDING IS A MIMETIC OBJECT

So, whereas Taussig discusses these ideas in relation to an object like this:

(*Kuna fetish object*)

We will discuss it in relation to a sound like this:

(*Annea Lockwood’s Sound Map of the Hudson River*[8])

Listen...

Copy and Contact

On the first question: How does a representation share in or take power from the represented?

Taussig reanimates James Frazer’s flawed but exhaustive representation

of early anthropology’s Othering strategies, *the Golden Bough*,[9]
and reconfigures Frazer’s notion of sympathetic magic.

For Frazer, sympathetic magic is constituted of two central laws,
the first being the law of similarity, the rule of like producing like:

“From the Law of Similarity, the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating. [10]”

Meaning before any magic can occur,
a copy must be made.
Just the act of making a copy is significant,
it separates source from copy and afford this magic.
Field recordings are not magic, in the supernatural, extrasensory sense,
nor are field recordists are magicians:
but no one cannot deny that some recordings are magical.
For our purposes
the argument seems obvious,
but the recording of the river is meant to be the river.

(NB copies do not always succeed
in sharing or taking power,
one example being the failed cover version.
Simon Frith observes:

“The fact that Pat Boone’s “personal stamp” was put on *Tutti Frutti* is clearly a bad thing, the fact that John Coltrane’s “personal stamp” was put on *These Foolish Things* is clearly a good thing.”[11]
The power is unbalance, magic fails)

(Listen)

The second law is the the law of contagion: “Things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed.”[12]

(The river acts on the recording - the recording acts on the river.)

In his essay *On The Mimetic Faculty*,[13]
Walter Benjamin’s argues that mimesis in its most “primitive” form
(his word not mine)
is absolutely sensuous,
it is haptic and embodied and feeling.
There is contact within the copy to the source.
This becoming,
where the copy interweaves its intention with the source,
where the source weaves its essence into the copy,
is absolutely present in the recording.
Benjamin cited cinema as a revival of this primitive, sensuous mimesis.

Taussig summarises: "This capacity of mimetic machines to pump-out contact sensuously ... is nothing less than the discovery of an optical unconscious.[14]"

We might agree
that through listening to field recordings
made on mimetic machines like Sound Devices recorders
or Zoom microphones
this contact-senuosity is -
when sound, context and intention are aligned in that
perfect listening moment -
palpable, even tactile,
uncovering an audio unconscious in the process, the
extent of which is still to be uncovered.

Benjamin didn't write specifically about sound recordings
in his essay,
but he wrote of a film that hits the viewer
"like a bullet,
it happened to him".[15]

This rapture in the magic of contact
defines field recording more specifically than any other
form of audio-visual reproduction.

More than music recording, or oral history, or radio,
the space between the recording-of, and the listening-to,
a field recording,
both temporally and spatially,
is contrived to be as slight as possible,
such that we can speak of "being there".
of a topological space-time-slip,
where the past, or an Other space,
is "in the room" with us.

"...a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very
body of the perceiver and the perceived...the magic of
contact and that of imitation.[16]"

The notion of contact is crucial in the field recording:
someone had to be there,
Next to the river,
Feeling it's cool presence,
for any magic to happen,
for power to be shared,
or taken.

CONTAGION AND CONTROL

Our second question:
How does the representation affect what it is a
representation of?

The law of contagion again:

"...whatever he does to a material object will affect
equally the person with whom the object was once in
contact.[17]"

This power, allowed by the copy and the contact,
is not always drawing from source to copy.
The channel can run in two directions.
In our case,
whatever the field recordist does to the recording
will affect that which was recorded.
So, what does the field recording do to the soundscape?

1) Listening to the copy heals the source:

(The curative power of listening
is not a novel idea -
Note confession, psychoanalysis, auscultation)

It would not be unreasonable
to say that the acoustic ecology movement
wants to protect our soundscape.
To diagnose its problems, and possibly to cure them.
One tonic is a careful listening to mimetic recordings.

Levack Drever cites Burroughs, the contemporary oracle
of contagion and control:

"By playing back my recordings ... when I want and with
any changes I wish to make in recordings, I become God
for this locale. I affect them. They cannot affect me."

Another answer:

Taussig: "Everything in this world, the visible reality, has
a spirit counterpart in another reality which controls it."

The field recording acts on the world
It's a form of immaterial spirit
by allowing an understanding through separation and
difference.
It creates a platform for a transformative re-imagining
and re-integration to the source.

The copy allows a connection with the source
that the source itself denies.
To act on the source, separation is crucial.

Annea Lockwood states: "Through exploring the sounds
created by natural phenomena and processes...I want to
intensify my sense of connection with rocks, rivers, bugs,
mountains, everything around me – my sense of 'non-
separation'.[18]"

Dennis Hastings' sleeve notes
describe the affective power of listening
to old wax cylinder recordings of their tribe
on contemporary members of the Ohama:

"I don't know quite what to expect when the wax cylinders
came back. After a year or so it has affected people in
different ways. For some of the older singers and older

people that remember them those songs, it is renewing, it brightens them up...it was like a supernatural or spiritual gift that had been given back to the people again.”[19]

Here the mimetic copy affects across generations. By intervening in the modern-day Ohama the copy transfers power back to the community from where it was taken ninety years earlier.

IMMATERIAL SPIRITS

Taussig notes how mimetic objects like photographs are often burnt to release their spiritual power. For Taussig this disembodiment, this erasure of form, is crucial to their effective use.

Field recordings exemplify this total erasure of material form, with their sound being “an entity without materiality”. The immaterial aspect of sound recording allows it currency in magical exchange of a higher value than other material representations. In relation to the burnt wooden figures of the Cuna, “the magically important thing is the spirit of the wood, not its carved outer form”. The sound recording, having no body except its vessel of the record, tape, or mobile phone, is all spirit. The notion of the material object transposing into immaterial spirit or soul is, perhaps, not better exemplified than in the enigmatic transference of vinyl, tape, CD or keypad strike into immaterial, mimetic sound, wherein the spirit of the object is released from inanimate media into the pulsing ear of the listener. A cursory listening to some of the language of sound recording: capture and release, pressing or burning, erasure and winding, uncovers similar processes at work. The mimetic copy is “released”, as with other products of Benjamin’s mimetic machines such as films or DVDs, to be heard. CDs are “burned” before we can listen to them.

COPIES OF COPIES OF COPIES OF COPIES

Another beautiful story from Taussig’s book; a sonic example of the complexity of mimesis and its bottomless nature:

For the Kuna the occurrence of a snakebite provokes much activity in the villages of an afflicted person.

Snakebites are very dangerous to both the individual And to the body-politic of the group. Most interestingly, for the purposes of this discussion, the first act in dealing with a snakebite is to acoustically close down the village, Taussig notes, “no radios, no outboard motors, not even the flip-flop of thronged sandals, and no talking except when necessary [...] quiet is considered necessary because the souls of noises fly through the air and jolt the weakened soul of the patient.”

Here the noise itself has a spirit; its own copy; suggesting it not as simply the immaterial aspect of a material thing

(the moo of a cow, or the song of a man)

but as an immaterial thing which itself has further immaterial doubles

(the spirit of a representation, the moo of a moo).

The power still remains because the copy of the copy still contains the magic of contact.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief exploration of mimesis in field recording is only a speculative beginning. Suggesting a third way through the discursive mire of sound reproduction vs. representation, For a taxonomy of sound art’s multifarious modes of representational and reproductive mimesis I refer you to Allen Weiss’ book *Audio Mimesis*.

An approach to field recording via mimesis throws up some interesting questions that warrant further enquiry.

What is the nature of the power transmitted through field recordings?
What political, rhetorical or metaphysical agency is exploited in the process?
And how does this agency affect both the recording and its source?

The other is the nature (and culture) of an auditory unconscious:
To what extent do our ever growing archives of recorded sound represent an alternative, parallel and unconscious soundscape; an sonoral spirit-world?

And, to conclude, for anyone who is concerned with the revelation that the field recording is “just” a copy, we should remember

that its the act of copying
that allows magic to happen.

Taussig cites Hegel:

“(Mimesis) consists in actualizing the universal, and giving it spiritual vitality, by the process of breaking down, superseding fixed and determinate thought.”

The sensuous copy renders, to quote Borges,
“the original unfaithful to the translation”,
because it makes the world as we know it.
Human nature is the second nature of mimesis.
So, for the Hudson River as we now know it,
we have Annea Lockwood to thank.

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