Toward a Dark Nature Recording

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Nature sound recording has long been criticised for the artifice of the documents it produces. Joining this easy target is the implication that the form's aesthetic frame, which often intends to promote our connection to nature, actually serves to disconnect us. This paper reviews critiques of nature sound recording and suggests that by confronting what it excludes from 'nature', the form might yet come to terms with ecology.

> Picking up the vibrations of a material universe and recording them with high fidelity inevitably ignores the subject, and thus cannot fully come to terms with an ecology that may manifest itself in beings who are also persons – including, perhaps, those beings we designate as animals. (Morton 2007: 4)

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper profiles critiques that have accumulated concerning the recording of acoustic phenomena in the living world and the responses generated by these critiques. Specifically it is concerned with recordings whose subject is 'nature' or 'environment'. These are recordings where the composer minimises editing and manipulation with the intention of somehow representing the original sound field.

For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen the term 'nature sound recording' to refer to these works, primarily because it is a term that many recordists use to self-identify. I single out nature sound recording in particular, as opposed to other highly compositional forms that incorporate field recordings, because of its unique historical obsession with the documentation and transportation of place, as well as the paradoxes inherent in the practice and the criticisms it has attracted.

Nature sound recording has been panned as kitschy New Age, accused of pandering fantasy as 'reality' to a naive public, and, worse, maintaining and perpetuating a picturesque, Romantic view of nature as something that is over there, separated from us, to be quasi-religiously revered. From this perspective, the very core of nature sound recording would seem to be at odds with a modern interpretation of ecology, which suggests that a properly ecological view of the environment must challenge aestheticised views of nature and work to bridge the perceptual gap between us and 'nature' (Cronon 1995; Morton 2007).

Despite heavy criticism, there remains a steady production stream of nature sound recordings. These productions are not limited only to species catalogues, relaxation-centred New Age, or the documentary soundscapes often associated with acoustic ecology. New genres of the form have emerged, adopting new monikers and aligning themselves with sound art. While in these new genres there are many works that still portray an incomplete nature focused on the picturesque or sublime, there is a growing body of work intent on exposing these tendencies and expanding 'nature'.

Nature sound recording may yet be able to shed its Romantic biases and come to terms with ecology. Important conceptual work has already been done to help reframe discussion around nature sound recording. These counter-points bring much needed attention to the persistent portrayal of beautiful nature, a practice that seems somehow inappropriate in the current context of environmental crisis.

2. ENVIRONMENT AND FRAME

To frame nature sound recording and its critiques, it is helpful to use the lens of aesthetics in general, and environmental aesthetics in particular. When we view nature sound recording as an aesthetic act, the critiques look a lot like literary ecocriticism, as they are intended to create a healthy self-examination of what these works mean and what they reflect about our perceptions of nature and environment.

Historically, aesthetics has concerned itself with objects explicitly designed for humans, such as works of art. Of course the human experience is not limited only to objects made for and by other humans, and an aesthetic appreciation can be had of the environments of which we are a part. This *environmental aesthetics* then is primarily concerned with how we experience and appreciate our larger environment: natural, manipulated and social.

A central issue in environmental aesthetics can be stated as this: what is it exactly that we are appreciating? Our environment (the 'object' of appreciation) is an open system, variable in space and time, and even variable through the act of observation itself. As Allen Carlson eloquently notes, 'there are no frames for the objects of environmental aesthetics' (Carlson 1998: 1). But there are objects.

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The idea of a frame here is an important one. Nature sound recording as an act imposes a frame on a boundless, limitless, process. This frame freezes a portion of our environment to be appreciated as a work in itself. An object. By explicitly choosing a frame, nature sound recording suggests what in our environment we might appreciate and how we might appreciate it. In this way, nature sound recording itself can be viewed as an approach to environmental aesthetics.

Nature sound recording is as much defined by what it chooses to frame as what it chooses to exclude from that frame. Implicit in this frame is a statement about what is worth appreciating in nature: the beautiful. Outside the frame of nature sound recording is then apparently not nature – it is the unappreciated, the ugly. For the majority of these recordings, man is not nature, machine is not nature, and their interface with environment is not natural. Also excluded from this nature is death, destruction and waste – the abject.

The aesthetics of nature sound recording are steeped in fantasy. This fantasy is one in which our ecosystems are healthy and the internal combustion engine does not exist. It is from this fantasy that the seeds of criticism grow.

3. CRITIQUING THE NATURE SOUND FANTASY

Tracing its roots to scientific investigations in bioacoustics, one of the most dominant forms of nature sound recording was defined by the blockbuster 1970 album *Songs of the Humpback Whale*. With a few exceptions, this style portrays a pastoral world in which the only sign of man is the recording itself. Here, songbirds are in perpetual chorus, lush rainforests are packed with exotic animals, and tranquil meadows are filled with singing insects. It is a world meticulously constructed by hundreds of recordists over many decades, who have all sought out tiny windows in time and space where man cannot be heard.

At about the same time in the early 1970s, the World Soundscape Project created by R. Murray Schafer and colleagues was exploring our 'soundscapes'. Later associated with the study of acoustic ecology, this style grew from an artistic and academic tradition in an attempt to draw attention to noise pollution in the environment. Further, it took the view that the sound environment is a composition for which we are responsible. While there is clearly overlap in execution with nature sound recording, we separate it from our discussion because the original intent of the work is generally focused on sensitising the listener to an awareness of all sound in one's environment, rather than focusing specifically on portraying nature (Wrightson 2000).

To paraphrase Cheryll Glotfelty, if your knowledge of the outside world were limited to the popular works of nature sound recording, you would quickly discern that Earth in the late twentieth century was alive with sound of non-human animals and that man was perhaps only a benign observer with his recording devices (Glotfelty 1996). However, those of us living through the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century recognise that, by most accounts, we are in the midst of a deep environmental crisis. Beyond global climate change driven by human action and a constant assault by industrial technologies on natural systems, there is an ongoing and massive loss of biodiversity so great it is characterised as a sixth great mass extinction event (Parenteau 1998).

By listening to the recordings alone, you might even think that the artists themselves are unaware of their environment. A quick survey of liner notes and websites, however, reveals a community of artists that are apparently in touch with their environment and incredibly concerned with the proliferation of man and machine across the planet.

> Most, if not all, nature sound recordings foster the illusion of healthy ecosystems; many times even the location being recorded is severely degraded, and only a combination of boundless patience in the field, careful editing out of human noise, or overdubbing of field recordings can recreate the primal fullness. (Cummings 2001: 14)

Jim Cummings' statement from the liner notes of *Dreams of Gaia*, quoted above, is particularly interesting in that there is obviously a deep recognition that nature sound prefers an illusion of 'primal fullness' to the current environment in which the sounds of nature are playing a smaller and smaller part.

The purpose of this edited world, crafted by aesthetic choice, is often claimed to be the preservation of unique, disappearing biophonies or to provide tools to help connect people to the wild, intended to strengthen the listener's bond with nature. 'Paradoxically, this strange land is meant to enliven your sense of integration with the living, breathing community you walk through day to day' (Cummings 2001: 17).

In his writings on ecology, Timothy Morton discusses this tendency in art to aestheticise nature as creating a convenient distance between 'us' and 'ecology', allowing for a dangerously detached and rationalised experience of 'environment' (Morton 2009). This distance, which we call 'the' environment, has also been discussed by Arnold Berleant as one of the last survivors of Cartesian mind–body dualism, separated from us to be contemplated from a distance (Berleant 1992). Since environment is not considered 'us', this separation allows us to do questionable things like bury radioactive waste, produce mountains of toxic plastics, and eat our way through every species on the planet. These are acts done to a nature 'over there', while over here everything is just lovely.

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From this perspective, it appears possible that nature sound recording may actually be facilitating the very thing it is most vehemently against.

These ideas are actually part of the larger topic of ecocriticism. Although the approach deals primarily with environment in literature, ecocritical statements are pertinent to many areas of art that frame nature and environment, including sound. As Morton notes, 'it is in art that the fantasies we have about nature take shape and dissolve' (2007: 1). To that effect, the 'avoidance of unpleasant reality' (Love 1990: 226) by the dominant aesthetic in nature sound recording has not gone unnoticed.

David Dunn has taken particular issue with an often-stated idea that the recordings are an audio documentation of pristine natural environments, something that he finds particularly 'perverse' in the respect that a recording can never be anything more than a human intervention.

> The premise appears that the recordings will somehow sensitize the listener to a greater appreciation of the natural world, when in fact they are more often perpetuating a nineteenth-century vision of nature … I can certainly understand the preservation of actual biohabitats – but not as recorded sonic objects. (Dunn 1998: 103)

This common documentation theme may rest on the idea that place or environment can be preserved and communicated as an objective reality, able to reproduce a subjective experience in the listener of 'being there'. This idea, though, confuses the frame with the framed – that is to say, the recording and the place are just different entities altogether.

Francisco Lopez has written about this implied reproducibility of place in nature sound recordings.

> I don't think that 'reality' is being reproduced with these techniques; rather, a hyperreality is being constructed. The carefully recorded, selected, and edited sound environments that we are able to comfortably enjoy from our favorite armchairs offer an enhanced listening experience, one that we would likely not have if we were listening in the 'real' world. (Lopez 1998)

Experience of place and the phenomenological experience of 'reality' are certainly more complex than advances in recording technology alone are capable of representing. This aspect of the indeterminacy of 'environment' is one of the obsessions of environmental aesthetics, and, as Lopez alludes to, the experience of place affects the experience of sound.

Scott Sherk offers another perspective on this documentary tendency of nature sound recording, which he calls 'preservation', likening it to a stage in the development of photography (Sherk 2011). The intent of preservation is to archive and catalogue the changing world, which he recognises in the phonographic work associated with acoustic ecology. Perhaps then the sin of nature sound recording is in overestimating or overstating what can be preserved. Unlike photography, phonography has access to two extra dimensions: space and time. It's possible to imagine how capturing sound fields would seduce anyone into thoughts that some essence of place has been captured. However, this idea seems to have very little critical support.

4. CONFRONTING BEAUTIFUL NATURE

There is a newer body of recorded work, some of which can be considered as a critical response to the state of nature sound recording, seeking to expand the aesthetic frame. These works are typically not directly associated with nature sound recording in its purist sense, aligning instead with genre monikers such as 'sound art', 'field recording' and 'phonography'. This new wave of recordists has brought with it a healthy shift in perspective where the sounds of human and non-human life mingle, geological forces are mined for their acoustic emissions, and the air and weather are sound producers, if only by proxy of their effect on other things. While there is still a powerful thread of documentation in these new forms, there is also something that is closer to 'revelation', seeking to expose the hidden aspects of 'nature' (Sherk 2011). It is in this thread of revelation that we hear a path forward in the deconstruction of nature sound recording's 'hyperreality' through a confrontation with the idea of beautiful nature.

Besides his written critique of the reproducibility of place, Francisco Lopez's *La Selva* and the accompanying essay (Lopez 1998) formulate a response to the typically pastoral or bucolic framing of nature sound. With a dense edit of recordings made in the Costa Rican rainforest, Lopez promotes his Schaefferian notion of 'transcendental listening', where sound objects are allowed and even required to have a life of their own, separate from that of their origin.

La Selva, as well as his spring 2011 installation *Hyper-Rainforest* presented at EMPAC, is about as close as his work gets to what we understand as nature sound recording; however, his approach explodes the ideas of representation. Lopez's nature is even more fantastical than the fantasy we hear in nature sound recordings. In his works, forests transform into transcontinental animal compositions, and thunderstorms become absolutely apocalyptic. He confronts the hyperreal of nature sound recording by embracing it and accentuating its flawed assumptions almost to caricature.

David Dunn's nature sound work is varied and ranges from compositional pieces to flirtations with scientific investigation. One recent work worth considering in the current context is *The Sound of Light in Trees* in which Dunn presents the acoustic ecology

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of pinyon tree, *Pinus edulis*. This species of pine, like others in the western USA, has recently fallen victim to an invasion of bark beetles that are decimating the population. In his piece, the endemic sound generated by the tree is awash with the sounds of the invader; bark beetles grind away at the interior fibres, apparently clicking and scraping to communicate with one another.

In the notes that accompany *The Sound of Light in Trees*, Dunn initially states that his intention is to explore a relatively unexplored area of bioacoustics and 'to convince the listener of the surprising complexity of sound occurring within one species of tree as emblematic of the interior sound worlds of trees in general'. While it certainly achieves both of these stated goals, the recording also has another theme. A little further into the notes Dunn finally relents. 'If these infestations are a result of global temperature changes then the consequences are potentially dire' (Dunn 2006).

The implication of his studies and of the resulting recordings are that the climate of the west has changed, creating a new environment that is evidently hospitable for the bark beetles and hostile for the pinyon pine. Further, this change is caused by human activity. These recordings then are clearly intended to frame the *current* environment, and not a fantasy. Through a nature sound recording, we confront a sobering picture of a changing environment where we bear witness to the decimation of a tree species at the jaws of a beetle. We are complicit in the event and as listeners are unable to intervene.

The Sound of Light in Trees typifies the 'revelatory' especially in regards to flipping the aesthetic frame to the excluded 'ugly', including the calamity that is unfolding in our natural environment. These are the sounds of global climate change. Also along this line of investigation is Katie Paterson's *Vatnajökull (the sound of)*, which chronicles the melting of a glacier, another victim of warming temperatures.

A standout project by artist Peter Cusack entitled *Sounds From Dangerous Places* is a series of recordings made at sites that have sustained major environmental damage. The only recordings from this series that seem to be publicly available are *Chernobyl Dawn* and *Chernobyl Frogs*, recorded in the exclusion zone of Chernobyl, Ukraine (Cusack 2007). Ironically, the recordings of bird and frog choruses frame Chernobyl as a haven for wildlife, which was apparently created by the evacuation of people after the nuclear disaster there in 1986. This work stands as a comment on the effects of man on wildlife, not in his presence, but in his self-imposed absence. The idealised scenes of nature are captured here by seeking out a place where man has forfeited his capacity to inhabit the space, rather than by careful manual editing.

Each of the pieces mentioned confronts the idea of beautiful nature promoted by the mainstream of nature sound recording by playing with the hyper-reality of the content and revealing some of man's impact on environment through the sound of non-humans. There is another approach to this confrontation that makes an extreme shift of frame, making the content nearly the opposite of what nature sound recording traditionally values.

5. TOWARD A DARK NATURE RECORDING

> The face of Nature may be compared to a yielding surface, with ten thousand sharp wedges packed close together and driven inwards by incessant blows, sometimes one wedge being struck, and then another with greater force. (Darwin 1859: 67)

If we were to invert the fantasy of nature sound recording, we might arrive at something like Christopher DeLaurenti's *The Night I Met Maria C_*, which plays with the idea of human waste. At its most obvious, *Inside the Wallingford Transfer Station* features the city dump. On the title track DeLaurenti is part of the (party) scene, getting 'wasted'. Waste is portrayed as behavioural and environmental. These recordings are not a part of the nature that results in dawn choruses, it is what is left over.

DeLaurenti's piece is representative of an aspect of the excluded that we hear far less frequently: waste, death and the interface between man and environment. Here, as you might expect, the results are often ugly, violent or horrific. We might call this 'dark' nature recording, after theorist Timothy Morton's 'dark ecology'. In Morton's conception, a dark ecology is meant to help stimulate an understanding that environment is everything including (and perhaps especially) those things we would perhaps rather not see. While it too is an aesthetisation of nature, its intended use is as a tool to expose our biases.

By refocusing the aesthetic frame on the abject, a dark nature recording can provide a stark relief from which to evaluate the differences in our perception of nature. While much of the work in this area has an activist intent, the ideas do not preclude artistic treatment or interpretation. Our use and abuse of animals is often hidden from media, and capturing these events requires activism. These recordings related to ecological activism are interesting because more than just confronting the ugly side of our idealised nature, such as predator–prey relationships, they make visible aspects of ecology we know are there but would rather not see.

For example, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) played back a recording of 'rabbits' screams' outside Donna Karan's offices in New York City during fashion week. In a press release PETA says, 'the recording was taken during an undercover investigation of a fur farm in China, a country from which Karan sources rabbit fur for her designs' (PETA 2011). While this extreme action is standard operating

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procedure for PETA, it is incredibly radical in the nature sound world.

Another notable recent addition to this thread comes from recordist Martyn Stewart who, prompted by videos of the killing cove in Taiji, Japan, recently recorded and released sounds of the incredible culture of dolphin slaughter (Stewart 2011). Up until these recordings, Stewart was widely known for his more traditional and benign nature soundscape work.

This area is not only activist horror shows. A more traditional dark nature recording comes from Chris Watson, who brushes the subject of death, perhaps unintentionally, in a track called 'Vultures, Nine Birds Feeding On Zebra Carcass, Itong Plains, Kenya' (Watson 1998). It is a scene that long ago found its way into wildlife video documentaries yet has eluded nature sound recordings.

Ultimately, I am not advocating for a fetishism of gore and violence in nature sound recordings, but it certainly feels like a long-overdue reaction that may well provide a needed counterpoint. If fantasy creates inappropriate distances between environment and us, perhaps a practice of dark nature recording could actually begin to reflect the totality of an ecology from which we are inseparable.

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