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Writings

Speaking From Inside the Soundscape

By Hildegard Westerkamp

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I was sitting in the train to Stockholm. I had a Eurailpass, so I could travel first class. Within ten minutes after the train's departure the businessmen around me (I was the only woman) started to make calls on their cell phones. Since I wanted to do some work I got very irritated. I got up and said to the two gentlemen closest to me, "Excuse me, but is this an office or a train?" One of them answered, "If you don't want to listen to our phonecalls there is a room you can go to," and he pointed to the back of the car. I answered, "I don't feel I should have to move, as this is my reserved seat. Perhaps those who make phonecalls should go to that room." We were both agitated. He then said that if two people were having a conversation near me they would talk just as loudly, and I said, "No, in my experience people who are on the phone speak much more loudly." He said that that was not his experience and besides he had not really wanted to talk to me this morning.

This is not an experience typical for the Swedish soundscape. It is an experience typical for much first class travel anywhere in the world. That is why I felt confident to speak up. I was not treading on local Swedish toes, just on those global toes of the businessmen who were completely unconscious of how their voices dominated the soundscape.

The phonecalls did not exactly subside. So I put on my earplugs and continued with my work. Later I noticed that many of the non-phoning men were wearing headphones. Meanwhile the sealed-off train was speeding smoothly through the sunny landscape. Each one of us travellers existed in our own private sound bubble, within the moving sound bubble of the train.

So----- Where are we now?
It is June 10, 1998
We are in Stockholm, Sweden.

I am speaking to you foremostly as a composer who has chosen to compose with the sounds of the environment. But I am also speaking as someone who once emigrated from one culture to another, someone who is concerned about the health of the soundscape, someone who is still learning to listen and remains astonished and fascinated by the complexities of listening. Astonished, because the process of listening is always full of new experiences and surprises. Fascinated, because sound and listening are intimately connected with the passing of time and therefore with how time is spent, how life is lived. The soundscape voices the passing of time and it reaches into every moment of our personal and professional lives. It reaches right into *this* place and *this* moment of time and becomes a lived soundscape for all of us in this room.

listen

TAPE (ID #1):(1) *listen* *lislisten* *listen* *lislisten*
listen *listen* *listen* *listen* *listen* *listen* *listen* *listen*
lislisten *listen* *lislisten*

We are inside the act of listening. We are here to listen to the listening.

TAPE (ID #2):(2): Sound of footsteps. Then they stop. Then voice: "*Today is the 6th of December. I'm on*

Hollyburn Mountain. It's a very sparkling, cold, sunny day. It's very still up here. I hardly dare to talk for fear of

covering all the little sounds that are happening around me here. I am standing on a trail that goes through the forest.....

tape fades

Together we are creating a quality of listening and soundmaking in this sonic space, the quality of time passing

TAPE (ID #3)(3): City ambience. Then voice over ambience: "*The city is roaring tonight*-----

It's quite a clear evening-----*I hear a muddle of sound*-----
-----*That's the city*-----

-----*A large undefined sound*-----*anonymous sound of the city*-----*from anonymous sources.*"

Trainhorn sounds in mid-distance (----- long long short long: signal for train crossings),

Children's voices screeching a block away. "*Thank God for the kids and for those signals, trainhorns*---"

Trainhorn sound "----*that give a definition to this place, that give it a name.*" ambience fades

I have been asked to speak about the musical, artistic aspects of the soundscape and all that that entails. The more I thought about this, the more I realized that I cannot speak about anything involving the soundscape if I want to stay true to an ecological consciousness that positions itself inside the soundscape, as part of and participant in the soundscape, not as outsider, observer or commentator

TAPE (ID #4)(4): Footsteps on snow fade in under live talk

So, my speaking today will be an attempt to speak from inside the soundscape, more specifically from inside this soundscape, from inside remembered soundscapes, from inside my experience and knowledge of soundscape, from

inside the musical, artistic aspects of the soundscape.

TAPE continues: Footsteps continue. Stop. Then voice: "*Nobody has been here----- since the last snow fell-----*

-----Listen to the icicles."Icicle sounds, then tape fades.

When we were babies we did truly exist inside the soundscape. We listened and we made sounds from inside that place. We were, in fact, incapable of stepping outside of it.

TAPE (ID #5)(5): Waves crashing. Then voice: "*A sound, to me, is very much about time. Time passing. The quality*

of time passing. How it passes. And if we listen to that, we are very much inside the sound, very much inside

the soundscape."Wave ambience fades

Through listening we got an impression of the world into which we were born, and with soundmaking we expressed our needs, desires and emotions. Listening for us as babies was an active process of learning, one way of receiving vital information about our surroundings and about the people who were closest to us. And whatever we heard and listened to became material for vocal imitation, for first attempts to articulate, express and make sounds.

Listening and soundmaking (input and output, impression and expression) were ongoing activities, like breathing, happening simultaneously, always in relation to each other, as an ongoing feedback process. There was a balanced relationship between the acoustic information we received as babies and what we expressed vocally, a balance between listening and soundmaking. And in this balance we never questioned how our time passed. It simply passed by virtue of our being active inside of each moment.

TAPE (ID #6)(6): Rain/wave ambience. Then a mix of voice speaking words and phrases: "*Delicate balance-----*

-----carved-----carved out of ordinary time---voices, birds, crickets, child, wind---sounds in the wilderness,

echo-----echo in the wilderness-----voices--carved out of time--child, wind--echo in the wilderness---

changing, exploring, for listening-----voices, birds, crickets, child, wind-----the pleasure of----listening."

Ambience fades

The pleasure of listening. And the pleasure of soundmaking

TAPE (ID #7)(7): Baby's voice inside a watery, composed soundscape.

As babies we simply were inside the soundscape. And from that place of being we became growing, ever-changing human adults.

Depending on the social and cultural environment we grew up in, this open and energetic approach to life got shaped, expanded or curtailed to a greater or lesser degree as we grew into our own surroundings. Children as they grow up and develop their own voices are told frequently to be quiet and to listen to what adults, their parents and teachers have to say. In such a situation they become reluctant listeners and rarely have a chance to express, to make sounds, to use their own voices.

TAPE (ID #8)(8): Breathing sounds and heartbeat composed with other sounds.

All creative process is based on the desire to recreate a state of wholeness, a type of "oceanic state". To reach such a state of wholeness for us as grown people, has to become a conscious task. In fact, it may have to be developed into a skill, a discipline, a meditation. The refusal to place ourselves apart from the whole or to speak about the soundscape, but instead to place our speaking and sounding squarely into its centre, transforms our ways of speaking, our ways of listening.

TAPE (ID #9)(9): Flowing water, waves crashing. Then voice: "*Water wind----wind waves---wonder---*

sound---listen sound, water---crickets birds---birds crickets desert---sound desert wind desert---crispness---

---liquid crispness rain rain liquid-rain liquid water--wind--wind sound-wind sound forest---body forest body

breath-----breathing voice breathing crispness breathing crispness rain---rain rhythm rain wind rhythm wind

rhythm breath rhythm--voice tiny sounds tiny sounds silence quiet crispness quiet cricket liquid crispness cricket

brids quiet liquidity tiny sounds tiny sounds spirit rain spirit rain spirit forest spirit spirit" Rain ambience fades

Gregory Bateson says:

"The problem of how to transmit our ecological reasoning to those whom we wish to influence in what seems to us to be an ecologically 'good' direction is itself an ecological problem. We are not outside the ecology for which we plan - we are always and inevitable a part of it." (10)

Or Mark Riegner describes 'genuine ecological consciousness' to be:

"...an awareness that does not just think about ecological relationships but cognitively experiences the activity of relating." (11)

Or as Thoreau queries:

"where are the words, that speak for nature that still have earth clinging to their roots?"(12)

Equally we could ask here: where are the words that speak for soundscape that still have some truth ringing from the heart?

The problem of sound overload and excessive noise forces us to find those words and to position ourselves inside the soundscape, in fact, inside of any aural experience.

TAPE (ID #10)⁽¹³⁾: Sound of electric organ playing Christmas songs, then voice over music: *"This is live muzak----*

an electric organ and two fashionably dressed women, smiling, laughing, playing, alternating in playing the music

-----smoothly sliding from one song to another."Muzak fades.

In the spirit of "genuine ecological consciousness" we must place ourselves inside even this soundscape - not to be consumed by it, but to receive it with open, alert ears. And in the act of being inside such a moment and such a place we become action, we create. My being there produced the spontaneous words that you heard. What I called live muzak I would also call a form of music-as-environment (also called functional music). In this case, the music produced both the mood in the mall as well as demonstrated a product - the electric organ or keyboard. I want to linger with this topic for a moment. In my opinion it is located at the opposite pole of what soundscape composers are trying to do.

Music-as-environment, itself always a commodity, determines the tone of commodity exchange. It tries to conceal through its very "tone", its relationship to money and power, its function as mediator of human relations and its function as "moodsetter". Without it - so its producers would like us to think - we may not be able to interact, may not feel safe. It engulfs us acoustically, shuts out the problems of the outside world and makes the consumer environment sound as if "that's where the action is". It has established itself as a cultural system, a "place" in the world, the "womb" of twentieth century urban living. Because urban life revolves around making and spending money, and because this focus on life sets up a particularly stressful lifestyle, it is music-as-environment that seems to offer a bearable pace. But it is a false womb, of course. It can only exist inside the world of money.⁽¹⁴⁾

It is the type of music that no one really listens to, not only because stress blocks us from really listening, but also because it is designed not to be listened to. It is deliberately designed to place us inside the soundscape without us noticing that we are inside it, that we are at the mercy of its profit seeking agenda. Strategic marketing design of sonic space wants the consumer in a passive, non-listening place.

When we know that such forces are at work that take the authority to put us into a silenced, passive position, it is high time that we as soundscape composers, acoustic ecologists, soundscape designers implement our own listening skills and sound design knowledge and speak back.

One very effective way of not participating in that listener placement and acoustic marketing strategy is to record, to highlight, to reveal and uncover this situation and broadcast it back into the soundscape, hopefully on radio. Many of us - composers, audio artists, sound recordists - decided at one point to spring into action with the use of audio technology to do exactly that, not only to document a soundscape, to preserve disappearing sounds, to record nature sounds, but to analyse both social and musical meanings and actively to speak back to that which seems unacceptable.

TAPE (ID #11)(15): Ave Maria, store ambience, sound of cash register. Then voice: "We're at Eaton's. A few days .

before Christmas. This is the men's clothing department. Two loudspeakers are placed close to the cash register."

Rustling of bags-----"*The music invokes the image and atmosphere of a cathedral. And thereby*

the memory of religiouscelebration.-----It creates a holy atmosphere around the cash register.

Makes it an altar. "Man asks recordist: "just wondering what you are doing."
Recordist answers

"oh, I'm just recording the music." sound of cash register-----"*It is, as if one is involved in a holy*

act while paying for the goodies."Music fades.

The microphone is a seductive tool: it can offer a fresh ear to both recordist and listener; it can be an access to a foreign place as well as an ear-opener to the all-too-familiar, or a way to capture and speak back to the unbearable.

At the point at which the ear becomes disconnected from direct contact with the soundscape and suddenly hears everything the way the microphone "hears" and the headphones transmit, at that point the recordist wakes up to a type of new reality of the soundscape. The sounds are highlighted, the ears are alerted precisely because the sounds are on a recording.

The sounds are not only highlighted, but the whole experience *feels* to the recordist as if he or she is more intensely *inside* the soundscape, because the sound is closer to the ear and usually amplified. But in fact, the recordist is separated from the original direct aural contact with the soundscape, especially from the spatial realities of closeness and distance, from the ability to localize sound correctly.

In that contradiction, however, lies the seduction of the microphone: it feels like access, like closer contact, but it is in fact a separation, a schizophrenic situation. Soundscape recordists exist in their own sound bubble and hear the place in which they are, completely differently from everyone else in the same place. They are like foreigners or outsiders, no matter whether the place is their home or foreign territory.

The microphone collects all sound indiscriminately. It does not select or isolate them. This is in fact similar to how ears behave when we are in foreign surroundings. There our ears and psyche initially are incapable of selecting and making sense of what they hear. All sounds stream in unfiltered. They are as naked and open as the ear of the newborn and can only become selective once we begin to know and understand the sounds of the place.

In that state of nakedness, the newborn's ear, the ear in a foreign place, or the technological ear, the microphone, are all equally powerful awareness raising tools.

When the recordist is in a foreign country he or she is in fact positioned in a sound bubble *within* a sound bubble: doubly separated and at the same time doubly exposed, naked by virtue of hearing through microphone or headphones and with a stranger's ears.

TAPE (ID #12)(16): A mix of conversations with sellers in the street of New Delhi: "*Hallo hallo hallo hallo*"

Where're you from? Canada What is this? This is a microphone. You speak? A microphone . This is a microphone.

This is a microphone. Why you...? So, I'm recording the birds, what you're saying our conversation....

Where're you from?...Us talking. Do you want to say your name more clearly?What's your name?

My name Mulcha hallo hallo what's your name? My name Chedalla. What's this, Madam? It's a microphone.

Microphone So, I'm recording yeah? Yes. Good good. Where're you from? Canada. French or English?

No from Vancouver. Canada. Where're you from? Canada. Are you from Delhi? uuuhm Khajurao. ---Canada.

French or English. English. Where're you from? I'm from Khaj. From where? Madhja Pradesh. UP ----

Canada Toronto Montreal Vancouver ---Vancouver ----- What's your job. Pardon me? What's your job?--

What's my job! Yeah.-- hallo hallo What's your name ? Ram Anjur Ram Anjur your name is Anis--yes--

Anis Amud? What is your name? Rhadu Rhadu? And what is your name? Sanje. And Lathu.

How old are you? Me? Twelve. My name Mulcha. Mulcha. yeah. And your name? My name Chedalla.

Where're you from?Canada.tape fades.

If acoustic ecology is the centre from which we choose to function, we must always ask ourselves where we are situated - from the moment of the first listening, the first recording to the last building block in any project. It is all too easy to get carried away by our soundmaterials into the world of sound experimentation, electroacoustic music and forget the connection to the central focus of ecological thinking.

How do we avoid the very real danger of simply creating yet another product, a CD with yet more amazing sounds? Let's be clear that when we hear animal sounds from, say, the Amazon on a CD, we are listening to sounds that have been frozen into a repetitive format and medium and have been imported into our soundscape. They have become - in the best case - interesting aural information for us, a story, a type of text from another place. In the worst case, they have become an imported product, a "neat" sound without any real meaning beyond the WOW experience, an excuse for further non-listening, "new age muzak", or yet another object on our shelves. We must ask ourselves, when we compose a piece or produce a CD whether we, in fact, bring our listeners closer to a place or situation or whether we are fooling ourselves and are inadvertently assisting in the place's extinction.

Environmental sound is a type of language, a text. As well, the technology through which we transmit the sounds, has its own language, its own process. If we truly want to reveal meanings through recorded environmental sound and

truly draw the listener inside these meanings, then we must transmit precise information and knowledge and demystify technologically hidden processes. When we have done something simple as condensing the duration of a dawn chorus in order to fit it into a pre-determined time frame on a CD, let's say that and how we have done it. Let's name the voices of the place, let's mention the weather for example or the season, the landscape, the social and natural context. Or let us at least be clear about the inherent confusion about time and place when we work with environmental sound.

TAPE (ID #13)(17): Camel sounds audible underneath and between spoken sentences.

"At this moment it's November 28, 1992. I'm riding on a camel in the desert near Jaisalmer in Rajasthan,

India. Yet at this moment it's June 22, 1993. I'm riding on the airwaves together with my camel. On 102.7 FM on

Vancouver Co-operative Radio, CFRO. This is "Wireless Graffiti" live from the Vancouver East Cultural

Centre. My name is Hildegard Westerkamp and this is "From the India Sound Journal".

Desert ambience fades out, then fades up again.

"Camelvoice November 1992, here in Vancouver, June 93 at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre on

Co-op Radio riding the airwaves, disembodied from the sand, the heat, it's voice. Where is the camel at this

moment? Where is it eating? Who is riding it? Recording it's voice, photographing it's body, where is it now,

reproduced many times all over this ...uhm... global village. Is it still the same camel chewing and digesting

loudly in the village of Sam, Rajasthan?"Tape fades.

Let us be honest, clarify context and let us not fool the listener more than necessary with technology, but instead invite the listener into the place of our creative process and our imagination.

TAPE (ID #14)(18): Urban Rumble, then voice: *"..and I can't hear the barnacles in all their tinyess.*

It seems too much effort to filter the city out."

Urban rumble, low frequencies slowly get filtered out.

"Luckily we have bandpass filters and equalizers. We can just go into the studio and get rid of the city,

pretend it's not there. Pretend we are somewhere far away."

A dense texture of high frequency sounds.

"These are the tiny, the intimate voices of nature, of bodies, of dreams, of the imagination."

High frequency sounds fade out.

Each recorded work - whether a sound document, nature recording or a soundscape composition - each work itself becomes an entirely new soundscape experience, with new contexts and a new location. For the recordist/composer it is lifted out of a remembered and lived time and a more or less familiar place into the entirely new, often unknown place and time of its reproduction. For the listener it has been lifted out of unknown, unlived time and a foreign or perhaps remembered place into a lived time span and a more or less familiar place.

How can we possibly achieve resonance between our - the recordist/composer's - experience and that of the listener? How can we bridge these different places of experience?

Preferably these questions continue to be questions in our creative minds. In my opinion they can only be tackled inside each individual soundscape production or project. Ideally, if we have managed to strike a chord in our listeners, the listening experience will re-emerge as valuable memory and information at a later point, or it will encourage listeners to visit, hear and experience first hand the original place or situation of which the work speaks.

Then we have come full circle. The work has created the naked, open ear in the listener, a curious ear that has moved him or her into action, into interaction with the soundscape.

All our recording activities cannot re-create the healthy balance of listening and soundmaking of the young baby. But the "naked ear" of the microphone can achieve a wakefulness in our listening that has a direct influence on how we speak with environmental sounds through our compositions and productions. A new balance between recording/listening and composing/soundmaking can be achieved. It may be a cultural detour but it belongs to this and the next century.

Re-learning to hear and decipher the soundscape like a new language; treading carefully with curiosity and openness, aware that as recordists we remain outsiders; always attempting to create a type of naked, open ear; these may be ways to continue for the composer who wants to speak from inside the soundscape and at the same time transmit a genuine ecological consciousness.

TAPE (ID #15)(19): *Water sounds, birds, frogs, processed rain drops*

I would like to thank Sylvi MacCormac for providing excerpts from her composition "Voices of a Place" for this presentation. I would like to thank Henrik Karlsson for giving me the opportunity to speak here. And I would like to thank you all for being here and for listening with me.

Footnotes:

Except for the excerpts from *Voices of a Place*(footnotes 5, 6, and 9), all excerpts are from compositions, film soundtracks or radio programmes by the author. As well, the spoken voice in the tape parts, except for the baby's voice in *Moments of Laughter*(footnote 7), is that of the author.

- 1.From: *This Borrowed Land*,National Film Board, 1982, director, Bonnie Kreps.
2. From: *Soundwalking: Silent Night*,Vancouver Co-operative Radio, Winter 1978/79.
- 3.From: *Soundwalking: Trainhorn Vancouver*,Vancouver Co-operative Radio, Winter 1978/79.
- 4.From: *Soundwalking: Silent Night*,Vancouver Co-operative Radio, Winter 1978/79.
- 5.Excerpt from: *Voices of a Place*,by Sylvi MacCormac, Vancouver, 1998.
- 6.Excerpt from: *Voices of a Place*, by Sylvi MacCormac, Vancouver, 1998.
- 7.Excerpt from: *Moments of Laughter*,1988, Baby's voice: Sonja Ruebsaat at six weeks of age.
- 8.Excerpt from: *Breathing Room*,1990.
- 9.Excerpt from: *Voices of a Place*,by Sylvi MacCormac, Vancouver, 1998.
- 10.Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*,NY, Ballantine Books, 1972, p. 504.
- 11.Mark Riegner, *Goethian Science: Toward a Heightened Empathy with Nature*,in Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology Newsletter, Vol. 9, No. 1, p.10.
- 12.Quoted in Max Oelschlaeger, *Earth Talk: Conservation and the Ecology of Language*,in *Wild Ideas*,David Rothenberg, ed., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1995, p.47.
- 13.From: *Soundwalking: Silent Night*,Vancouver Co-operative Radio, Winter 1978/79.
- 14.Westerkamp, Hildegard, *Listening and Soundmaking: A Study of Music-as-Environment*.Simon Fraser University, M.A. Thesis, 1988, p.35.
- 15.Excerpt from: *Cool Drool*,1983.
- 16.Excerpt from: *Soundscape Delhi*,a work in progress, 1998.
- 17.Two excerpts from: *Camelvoice*,performed at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, June 22, 1993.
- 18.Excerpt from: *Kits Beach Soundwalk*,1989.
- 19.Excerpt from: *Talking Rain*,1997.

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