

Vertiginous Spaces, Phantasmagorical Geographies: Soundscape Composition After Sebald

By Iain Foreman

In this short essay, I explore a perceived affinity between soundscape studies and the literary poetics of W.G. Sebald. Sebald's work has served as an elemental inspiration for my emerging soundscape compositions. In particular, I attempt to echo the ambiance created in his work; his thematic preoccupation with place, memory, and melancholy; the poetic methodology of walking; and a preoccupation with ruins. By situating Sebald's poetics loosely within a tradition of "psychogeography" I hope to draw attention to the shared methods and outcomes of this tradition with soundscape composition.¹ I focus on walking and the situationist *dérive*, or drift, a heightening of the senses, a blurring of the real and imaginary, and a simultaneity of past and present. Furthermore, I identify in the shared aesthetic a positive response to the 'spatial turn' in the humanities which emphasized space and place over temporal concerns.

Hybrid in nature, Sebald's work falls into the space created by the fracturing of reality and the imagination, of fact and fiction. In terms of emplacement and displacement and the ambiance that shapes places, his work challenges the comfortable unity of space and presence. Here, the figure of the ruin is essential.

In the ruin, the past has a more powerful presence than the present; the relation between space and presence can be determined by the pastness of the space; in other words, a space's presence is determined by something which is absent. A soundscape composition can be considered a ruin inasmuch as its schizophonic displacement is destructive; the displacement is a moment of ruination. As a form of representation, the composition becomes an artifice that is also a ruin bearing some relation to the traces of reality. Following this destruction, however, listeners are able to preserve spaces once they enter into the realm of meaning and imagination. Soundscape composition is a process of artistic representation that plays on the dialectic of destruction and preservation.²

For Robert Harbison (1991: 99), ruins represent a 'way of seeing' that enables us to project our imagination onto empty spaces. By virtue of its fragmentation the ruin becomes a space in which the imagination can transform the environment. This process can be grafted onto discussions of language, texts and, ultimately, composition. For Ricoeur, metaphor is built on the "ruins" of the literal, only after the literal has been destroyed can new imaginative meanings emerge.³ Similarly, LaBelle suggests that in soundscape compositions that are place-based and site specific, place "comes to life by being somewhat alien, other, and separate, removed and dislocated, rather than being mimetically real." (2006, 211) By extracting sounds from their environments and performing them in a distinct place, soundscape compositions gain their aesthetic power from being built on the ruins of the literal and the real. This is echoed by Katharine Norman's definition of soundscape composition as 'real-world music' evoking an approach that provides an imaginative experience which roams past reality to a different level. She writes:

While not being realistic, real-world music leaves a door ajar on the reality in which we are situated. I contend that real-

world music is not concerned with realism, and cannot be concerned with realism because it seeks, instead, to initiate a journey which takes us away from our preconceptions, so that we might arrive at a changed, perhaps expanded, appreciation of reality (Norman 1996, 19).

A strong affinity between soundscape composition and Sebald's prose fiction is their shared methodology of walking and traveling as a way of experiencing sonic space and, to paraphrase Proust, acquiring new ears. In turn, reading and listening become ways of walking as the representational product is severed from its original context and reinvented as a virtual space. Here, travel is no longer associated with moving within space, but a traversal of time and memory as well. Traveling is, for Sebald, a means of entry to the past, through the composed observation of the communal remnants of collective memory found in buildings, museums and monuments, and from the powerful and uncanny emotional experience of being misplaced and lost. For Sebald and his characters, walking provides access to liminal places where the past casts its shadow on the present.

This brings me to the theme of this essay, a theme in which sounds resound. Sebald powerfully evokes the sensation of simultaneous, overlapping or superimposed places. In passages throughout his works, places are not distinct categories but often vessels for memories and visions, for dreaming and longing. In "Rings of Saturn," upon entering an Inn, the narrator was shown, by the landlord, his room situated under the roof. At first, "The clinking of glasses in the bar and a low murmur of talk rose up the staircase, with the occasional exclamation or laugh." Then:

After time was called, things gradually quietened down. I heard the woodwork of the old half-timber building, which had expanded in the heat of the day and was now contracting fraction by fraction, creaking and groaning. In the gloom of the unfamiliar room, my eyes involuntarily turned in the direction from which the sounds came, looking for the crack that might run along the low ceiling, the spot where the plaster was flaking from the wall or the mortar crumbling behind the panelling. And if I closed my eyes for a while it felt as if I were in a cabin aboard a ship on the high seas, as if the whole building were rising on the swell of a wave, shuddering a little on the crest, and then, with a sigh, subsiding into the depths. I did not get any sleep until day was breaking and the song of the blackbird was in my ear, and shortly thereafter I awoke once more from a dream... (1998, 207-8)

And stepping out onto the esplanade at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* Austerlitz considered the uncanny superimposition of other times and places:

You might think, especially on days when the wind drives rain over this totally exposed platform, as it quite often does, said Austerlitz, that by some mistake you had found your way to the deck of the Berengaria or one of the other ocean-going giants, and you would be not in the least surprised if,

to the sound of a wailing foghorn, the horizon of the city of Paris suddenly began rising and falling against the gauge of the towers as the great steamer pounded onwards through mountainous waves. (2002, 387)

These particularly sonorous excerpts challenge the idea that places are static geographical categories and draw attention to the interaction between our imaginative constructions of place and a place's objective reality. Barry Truax has, on many occasions both in print and in discussions of his compositional practice, suggested that he is exploring the ways in which the real and the imaginary reinforce each other. In the notes to his 1997 composition "Pendlerdrøm," Truax writes:

"Pendlerdrøm" (or "Commuterdream") is a soundscape composition that recreates a commuter's trip home from the Central Train Station in Copenhagen. At two points, one in the station and the other on the train, the commuter lapses into a daydream in which the sounds that were only half heard in the station return to reveal their musical qualities.

Truax's work journeys between a seemingly faithful documentary of the station's soundscape and a nonlinear dream sequence in which space and time collapse.

Train stations hold great significance in Sebald's works as places of transit caught between departing and arriving. Liminal and literally difficult to place, they afford glimpses into different temporalities and spatial configurations. At the beginning of "Austerlitz" the *Salle des pas perdus* becomes a place that only exists discursively; time is radically slowed down as the characters observe the "mighty clock" which "jerked forward, slicing off the next one-sixtieth of an hour from the future and coming to a halt with such a menacing quiver that one's heart almost stopped," (2002, 9) opening a textual space in which Austerlitz begins his account of the architectural history of the station and its history of colonialism, capitalism and the destruction of lives whose spectral presence resounds. Stations become a motif in the novel with the recurrence of London's Liverpool Street and Paris' Gare d'Austerlitz serving as defining textual spaces of the novel.⁴

Both Truax's soundscapes of trains and train stations⁵ and Sebald's prose fictions resist the representation of place in terms of fixed static categories; rather, they invoke the imaginative relationships that exist dynamically within them.⁶ Moreover, both the sounds and images evoked in these 'texts' illustrate the communicative limitations of language in furnishing moments of experiential liminality. Sebald demands his readers to be 'disobedient' (Blackler 2007). By suggesting to the reader that his work is nonfiction, Sebald's overall fictional practice engages the reader in a new way. What is presented as nonfiction, factual, or documentary is inverted through a complex engagement and identification by the reader in which the latter's imagination is free to make associations, recall memories and question the provenance of the representation. This aesthetic practice is also central to soundscape compositions highlighted below through a brief discussion of a composition by Hildegard Westerkamp.

In Westerkamp's compositions, by eliciting the listener as a collaborator, a space is created by the listener in which he or she engages at a purely textual, or compositional level. The listening space is a place of exile. The blurring of reality and imagination – real sounds and processed sounds, real-time events and compressed or expanded events – displaces listeners and takes them into their own imaginative space mediated by the composition. This way, the composition becomes a place transformed through the composer who, through recording, sequencing, filtering and editing, threads together places and times and creates a permanent form. Soundscape compositions often evoke a sense of hyperreality thanks to their economy of

sounds; like in memory, places are evoked through carefully selected sound atmospheres and sound events. But this is a fictional place; a discursive place to dwell in imaginatively. Thus even when soundscape compositions seem to mimetically represent the real, this mimesis is undermined by the 'textual' nature of the composition resounding in the ears of the listener. Reality is constantly subject to ruin and decay.

In Westerkamp's "Kits Beach Soundwalk" (1989) we begin with the ambiance of the beach and the following observation, accompanied by quacking ducks, narrated by Westerkamp herself: "It's a calm morning, I'm on Kits Beach in Vancouver. It's slightly overcast — and very mild for February." Continuing this *mise-en-scène* against the background of waves, seaplanes and marine life, at around 3 minutes Westerkamp acknowledges that the piece is a representation: a destruction of objective reality: "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." Using these tools she introduces substitutions of reality based on cultural representations and unconscious associations: "These are the tiny, the intimate voices of nature, of bodies, of dreams, of the imagination. You are still hearing the barnacle sounds, and already they're changing." Until finally the dreamworld takes over and the sounds merge losing their recognizable distinctness: "I often hear these tiny sounds in my dreams. Those are the healing dreams ... In one dream women living in an ancient mountain village were weaving the most beautiful silken fabric. It sounded like a million tiny voices whispering, swishing, clicking, sizzling." In a manner vividly reminiscent of Sebald (with an added poetic attention to sonorities that can only be attributed to Westerkamp), the associations and remembrances continue to unfold:

In another dream, when I entered a stone cottage, I entered a soundscape made by four generations of a peasant family sitting around a large wooden table eating and talking: smacking and clicking and sucking and spitting and telling and biting and singing and laughing and weeping and kissing and gurgling and whispering.

She proceeds to introduce cultural references as mediators between sounds and memories:

Like in Xenakis's "Concret PhII," made from the sounds of the discharge of smoldering charcoal. Tinkling all over the Brussels Pavilion, "like needles darting from everywhere," as Xenakis says. You can hear excerpts of that piece right now.

This last example echoes the sense of vertigo Sebald's character Austerlitz often faced in contemplating landscapes mediated by cultural memories and associations.

... everything becomes confused in my head: my experiences of that time, what I have read, memories surfacing and then sinking out of sight again, consecutive images and distressing blank spots where nothing at all is left. I see that German landscape ... as it was described by earlier travelers ... I see Victor Hugo's somber pen-and-ink drawings of the Rhine castles, and Joseph Mallord Turner sitting on a folding stool not far from the murderous town of Bacharach, swiftly painting his watercolors ... (2002: 226–7)

By walking, Westerkamp traverses the real and the imaginary, mixing a Proustian *mémoire involontaire* with cultural representations of sound to highlight simultaneous experiences of aural sensation. Episodes such as these challenge conventional descriptions of time and place and demonstrate the ways in which the sensual — in particular the visual and the aural — privilege a way of knowing in which the past exists in the present and the imaginary exists in the real. Indeed the image of the sonorous *Salle des pas perdus* (lit. the

hall of lost steps) is an apt metaphor for the entire process of walking and aurally occupying multiple spaces and lost times.

Soundscape compositions are dwelling places; both places of exile and places to emigrate to. Upon reflecting on Westerkamp's agenda, I am reminded of Adam Newton writing on Sebald's "The Emigrants" in which place itself is "never simply itself ... but is, rather, its own emigrant." For Newton, writing is "exilic and fugitive at its very core"; "Departure from place, reclamation of place, marking, crossing, and re-imagining of boundary all name features of discourse." (2005, 6) Westerkamp herself clearly recognizes this:

The soundscape composition is a *new place of listening*, meaningful precisely because of its schizophonic nature and its use of environmental sound sources. Its location is the electroacoustic realm. Speaking from that place with the sounds of our living environments inevitably highlights the world around us and our relationship to it. By riding the edge between real and recorded sounds, original and processed sounds, daily and composed soundscapes it creates a place of balance between inner and outer worlds, reality and imagination. Soundscape listening and composing then are located in the same place as creativity itself: where reality and imagination are in continuous conversation with each other in order to reach beneath the surface of life experience. (1999: 3)

Beyond the acoustic ecological concerns of soundscape composition, can we not also envisage an ethical dimension to hearing the world in simultaneous, interlocking times and spaces where the Other, both temporally and spatially situated, resounds? The potential to listen to different times and different places simultaneously enables us to stage a dialogue between our contemporary reality and an often violent past which may, as Blackler hopes, enable us to become "less predisposed to our natural tendency to destruction." (2007, x) The ability to superimpose multiple spaces through soundscape composition is critical in my own sonic exploration of 'postmemory' in contemporary Barcelona.⁷ As a city that has witnessed multiple traumas, from a civil war which has left places like *El Fossar de la Pedrera* (the Cemetery of the Quarry), a common grave for 4,000 people executed by the Franco regime, to the plight of those on the margins, including the city's 500 year old *gitano* (gypsy) community, how can we listen to spaces, people and places that have been eradicated to pave the way for 'progress'? Urban spaces such as Montjuïc, Somorrostro, and El Carmel continue to exist in the imaginations of Barcelona residents as shanty towns whose inhabitants were forced to find alternative accommodation as the city grew and expanded. Today, many of these formerly precarious places of extreme poverty have been transformed into ultramodern spaces of consumption and technology. Following Pierre Vilar, we can ask whether "The subjective aspect of events, the 'atmosphere' in which they took place, is also a condition of history ... Indeed, can history be made real if [this aspect] is not resuscitated?" (Vilar cited in Fraser 1994, 29) Is it the job of the soundscape artist to contribute to a sensual ethnography of the past by virtue of its ability to evoke the atmosphere of place? Is this a project essentially based on postmemory; of hearing through another's ears; "of remembering through another's memories" (Hirsch 1997, 10)?

Following Sebald's footsteps, a focus on *sonic* spaces can provide an oblique approach to the histories of atrocities and a peripheral perspective upon the traces of destruction in material culture that cannot be conveyed in its totality using representational language (Martin 2007, 133). Furthermore, following such a method, we must recognize that we are "forced to continually interpret reality in order to create meaning, and that this process necessarily entails a partial destruction of that reality...in order to create the possibility of a new meaning..." (ibid). This is the juncture at which Feld's

*acoustemology*⁸ and Derrida's *hauntology*⁹ could possibly meet and exchange information on how we sonically know a place through the traces of sounds that continue to unsettle the present. Additionally, a combination of these two approaches furnishes an epistemological approach: *acoustemology* (acoustic epistemology), with an ontological one: *hauntology*, with the latter drawing attention to the uncanny sense of being and non-being, presence and non-presence that places (especially ruins) often evoke. This move calls for an ethical relationship to the Other and an acknowledgement that the "living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be." (Jameson 1999: 39)

In conclusion I would like to return to the theme of psycho-geography, mentioned in the introduction, and comment on the contribution of soundscape studies to a method which enables us to constantly see and hear anew; to uncover faded vistas and forgotten sounds; and to weave memory, dreams and the imagination into our lived environments. Soundscape composition allows us to approach an aural environment as a palimpsest in which we hear the footsteps of others before us; the echo of bells in the distant past. A final walk with Sebald, following his *dérive* in the 'Rings of Saturn,' illuminates the themes I have discussed in this essay. We are taken to Dunwich, a town on the coast of Suffolk in East England, which was once one of England's largest ports. However, as the coastline gradually eroded, the town was lost to sea. Local legend claims that on certain tides, bells from Dunwich's many former churches can be heard ringing below the waves. I end this article with Alec Finlay (2007), in his poem 'The Sunken Bell,' part of a collection inspired by Sebald, imagining the underwater soundscape of Dunwich:

St Bartholomew's, St John's, St Martin's, St Michael's,
all sunk; they say you can hear their bells toll
in the tide. Let's cast a new bell from molten flame,
sink it deep, before the sea covers the land.

Endnotes

- 1 Psychogeography reveals the "emotional and behavioural effects of the environment, and its ambience." (Baker 2003, 323) The term first appeared in Guy Debord's 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography' (1955) and was defined as "the study of the effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals."
- 2 This dialectic reflects Ricoeur's hermeneutics which constantly plays on the unity of continuity and discontinuity (1981).
- 3 Ricoeur writes: "It is, in my opinion, at the moment when a new meaning emerges out of the ruins of literal predication that imagination offers its specific mediation. ... It consists in the coming together that suddenly abolishes the logical distance between heretofore distinct semantic fields in order to produce the semantic shock, which, in its turn, sparks the meaning of the metaphor. Imagination is the apprehension, the sudden glimpse, of a new predicative pertinence, namely, a way of constructing pertinence in impertinence" (Ricoeur 1991, 130).
- 4 Liverpool Street Station also appears in Janet Cardiff's 1999 audio walk *The missing voice* (case study B). Cardiff takes the listener through a real walk that simultaneously – through composed soundscapes heard through headphones – situates them in a fictionalized realm. The walk begins at a library in Whitechapel, East London, and ends up in the public concourse of Liverpool Street Station. The blurring of the real sounds of the city and those heard in the headphones disorient. However, this disorientation, to draw on de Certeau, illustrates the ways in which walking is not simply movement; through the *dérive*, the drift through space, the listener-walker themselves give 'shape to spaces ... they are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize.' (Certeau 1984, 97, see also Pinder 2001, 5)
- 5 Truax's "La Sera di Benevento" (1999) similarly evokes the train station as a space in which fissures between the real and the imagined arise.

- 6 Reflecting the interface between disparate places and spaces, de Certeau suggests that train travel is in fact “incarceration”: “traveling incarceration” where the “unchanging traveler is pigeonholed, numbered and regulated in the grid of the railway car.” (1984, 111)
- 7 Marianne Hirsch discusses ‘postmemory’ as the indirect and fragmentary memory of the second and third generation whose main connection to the object is via creative processes and imaginative investment (Fuchs).
- 8 Feld defines acoustemology as a sonic way of knowing a place: “an exploration of sonic sensibilities, specifically of ways in which sound is central to making sense, to knowing, to experiential truth. This seems particularly relevant to understanding the interplay of sound and felt balance in the sense and sensuality of emplacement, of making place.” (Feld 1996, 97)
- 9 Hauntology derives from Derrida’s discussion of the specter of Marx but refers beyond that to the continual presence of the past in the present. This political attitude impedes the repression of history and enables a critical engagement with it. (see also Trigg 2006, 135)

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The R Murray Schafer Soundscape Award for 2010

The Glenfraser Endowment at Simon Fraser University was established in December 2009 by Barry Truax and Guenther Krueger to promote the work of the World Soundscape Project and acoustic communication research that has been active at SFU for the past 40 years. The initial use of the fund is to sponsor the annual R. Murray Schafer Soundscape Award for student(s) at SFU who demonstrate high academic achievement, skills and interest in soundscape studies/composition or acoustic communication.

Eight applications were received and the review panel, impressed by their quality, has recommended two of them for this year’s award, valued at \$1000 each. The recipients are Vincent Andrisani, a Ph.D.

student in the School of Communication, and Jennifer Schine, an M.A. student in the same school. Vincent presented a paper at the WFAE conference in Mexico City and is the co-founder of the Humber River Soundscape Project, and Jennifer is researching soundwalking as a tool for tapping into memory and nostalgia. Both will be presenting papers at this year’s Canadian Acoustics Conference in Victoria, BC.

Anyone wishing to support this award in future years is welcome to make a donation, either to the annual award, or else to the endowment itself. For further information, contact Erin Geary, SFU Advancement (erin_geary@sfu.ca).