Auditing Acoustic Ecology

By Paul Carter

Comparetti and Pitrè both published ['The Parrot'] at the beginning of their anthologies as a kind of prologue.
— Italo Calvino[1]

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General definitions are not usually of much operational value. Attempts to systematise the body of research and practice denoted by the phrase acoustic ecology are likely to miss the more salient fact, which this international meeting recognizes, that it is a field which, ever since its initial mapping by Schafer, Westerkamp et al, has shown a remarkable capacity to lead to other events. Whether or not acoustic ecology *should* possess a disciplinary identity, its current state is one of bifurcation. One camp, primarily composed of sound activists (composers, sound artists) associates acoustic ecology with the aesthetic exploration of sound environments. The implicit object is ameliorative, to draw attention to a neglected dimension of the everyday world, and, by appealing to the listener's musical sensibilities, to enlist support for its preservation and protection. Another camp, mainly represented by anthropologists and historians, regards acoustic ecology primarily as a strategic tool for resisting the visualism of Western analytical thinking. Applied to diverse cultures and historical periods, it unveils dimensions of social and cultural signification that a deaf perusal would inevitably miss.

Obviously this contrast is overdrawn. Philosophers like Don Ihde or F. Joseph Smith, in trying to extract from Husserl an auditory phenomenology, have aspired to retune the world, as well as to make a practical, methodological contribution to cultural studies. Similarly, a number of anthropologists, included Roy Wagner, James Weiner and Steven Feld, have eloquently promoted the *general* lessons for bio-sphere sustainability, which they derive from their studies of the auditory cultures of certain New Guinean peoples. Still, the general point probably remains valid: the pluralist discourse of acoustic ecology displays considerable heterogeneity. Scholars of the silent discourses of image and text have recently attempted to prove that their differences are superficial. W.J.T. Mitchell, for example, proposes a discursive category he calls the 'imagetext.' Could something similar occur in the field of acoustic ecology, leading to an integrated theory and practice of 'soundtexts'?

To answer this one way or the other would mean, first, identifying limitations in the present constellations of acoustic ecology research. Any research program that takes a notion of harmony or reharmonisation as its ground and goal risks recapitulating the nostalgic trope which, already in the early 17th century according to Francis Bacon, characterized the empirical sciences, and which, in repairing fallen appearances, has as its goal the restoration of Paradise. In any case, it's hard to see (or hear) the role played in this program by noise or by the infinite species of inaudible sound which vibrate around and through us. On the other hand, semiotically-predicated accounts of the role sounds play in social organization and cultural production are deterministic in another way. They routinely discount the performative character of sound production, transmission and reception: speakers, hearers and listeners participate in an immersive act of making sense at that place, a process which depends minimally on the sound's semiotic load. Were it otherwise, we would be mere channels of communication, like parrots.

If such limitations are real, they suggest that a theory and practice of 'soundtexts' would need to be non-musical and non-sociological in temper. What, it might be asked, does that leave? The question might better be: what features of an acoustic ecology might now assume epistemological value? The throwaway comparison at the end of the last paragraph didn't do parrots justice. It may be that the lowly status mimicry enjoys in our culture perpetuates a form of auditory Cartesianism. In this the voice of the other, and indeed the whole phenomenon of mimetic desire in dialogue, is discounted. Even the parrot, in saying back what is said to it, says something different. But these subtleties are lost so long as the auditory subject continues to be conceived as a silent listener. As Tomas reflects in his Montreal apartment, after listening to Feld's *Voices of the Rainforest*, the Kaluli 'can sing to us (to me) from track number 6 [but] I can never reply.'[2] Unless critically deployed, sound recording technologies prevent the addressed listener from satisfying his mimetic desire. They also prevent him from remaining silent; or better, they risk deafening him to the environment of sounds. Writing of Schafer's proposal to locate microphones in remote wilderness zones, and to transmit their sounds 'without editing into the hearts of the cities,' Virginia Madsen observes, 'The paradox is [] that Schafer, through this "radical radio" where no editing occurs (no cuts, no wounds), is present in nature as never before. The microphone does not open a window of transparency onto nature. Rather, the microphone and the whole machine attached to it, amplifies and heightens the sounds of nature (as well as those cultural intrusions), creating a hyperspace.' [3]

In other cultures parrots and parroting enjoy a higher status. It has been recognized that their uncanny ability to hear sounds and repeat them raises fundamental questions about self and other, and the dialogical contract binding them. How we hear the other will determine the freedom allowed to him, a freedom which also implicates us. On an ethics of listening social justice depends, and so might the sustainability of the non-human environment. The great Persian mystic and poet Rumi (d.1279) explores such matters in his dramatic poem, 'The Parrot and the Merchant.' Their dialogue has three phases. In the first, the Merchant (Ego) desires release from itself: 'I crave some other self. Only you understand, only you provide that other self I crave – by your voice, your beauty, your … T: Self I crave … M: Yes, yes. You understand perfectly, as always. T: As always. I understand perfectly, though I only echo you.' In the second, the *tuti* points out that the other the merchant addresses is, as it were, a sociological construction: 'I am an echo of yourself which you have caged. I have no other song to sing but songs of being caged to sing you songs of your old tired self that longs to hear some other song but can't because

you have that key around your neck to keep me caged.' In the third, the *tuti*, hearing of his free brother's death, imitates him. Believing his pet is dead, the Merchant unlocks the cage and casts the bird out of the window. The *tuti* revives mid-air and flies away. The moral? 'We are brothers, not creatures to be put in cages./ My brother taught me by his silent act/ My own voice kept me a prisoner./ We are two bodies, he and I, but one soul.' [4]

A parable about the ego and the soul, Rumi's play is also perhaps a challenge to acoustic ecology. To perceive the world's sounds in terms of their harmonization is, ultimately, to align acoustic phenomena with one's own interests. It is to evaluate them echoically, in terms of fixed (caged?) intervals, and the sense of an enlarged understanding that results may be narcissistic. The *tuti's* second point, that the harmonies generated in this way are violent, and the nostalgia attributed to them a form of acoustic imperialism, is a profound one. Here, even F. Joseph Smith's lofty ideal, 'a phenomenology of musical sound [that] takes in what we now call music, dance and speech,' and which 'restore[s] a unity that was lost since the Greeks,' sounds suspect.[5] To treat the *tuti* as a machine for playing back fond memories is to anticipate the electroacoustic confinement of listening. When, for example, it is proposed to find relationships between 'ways that people conceive of their universe (cosmology), organize themselves into groups (social organization) and organize sounds (music and some of the sonic features of language),'[6] the cultural construction of hearing is foregrounded at the expense of listening. What falls acoustically outside this pre-capitalistic, pre-missionary environment can only be characterised as encouraging an auditory freedom that is destructive. To neutralize such violence, the *tuti* plays dead. In Avital Ronell's terms, it refuses to take the call. It transforms mimicry from a sign of enslavement to a strategy of self-liberation. Demonstrating (by its self-sacrifice) that dialogue is performative, the parrot inserts into the speaking-hearing feedback loop the right to listen, and hence the capacity to hear and to speak differently.

The implication of Rumi's story is that a *listening* ecology is desirable, in which sonic relations are defined not harmonically but transformationally. Mishearing and mispronunciation, providing the supplement of difference, which differentiates a performance from a repetition, would mark a social and environmental relation defined by a continuous retuning, free of nostalgia for ideal forms. American sound historian Bruce Smith has recently suggested that Barry Truax' ordering of sound (primal cries-speech-music-ambient sound) 'along a continuum of syntax that is temporally more and more extended' can be reconfigured as a circle that begins and ends in primal cries – 'Human exclamations of "oh," "ah," "mmm" and the like take their place in the ambient world of animal sounds, wind and rushing water.'[7] But perhaps a better spatial representation is one derived from the etymology of *discourse*. Sound is constitutionally a to-and-fro, a running hither and thither. It is an activity of what Michel Serres calls the multiple as such. Listening registers and mediates this process. Shaping the sounds it hears and speaks, it finds where they belong in the performance.

Photo: Jean-Pierre Chabrol

Paul Carter, detail of 'Migrant's Vision', Nearamnew, Federation Square, Melbourne.

A prologue is not the place to develop these opening thoughts into a more sustained argument, one likely to stimulate conversation. At the same time, in parroting themes that the International Acoustic Ecology Symposium seems set to address, perhaps they will provide an echo in advance of discussions to come. As for the discussions themselves, may they heed the perhaps unsurprising in formation, that parrots only talk in captivity.

Paul Carter published *Repressed Spaces: the Poetics of Agoraphobia* (London: Reaktion) in 2002. His exhibition, *Mythform: the Making of Nearamnew*, and the soundscape *Nearamnew Speak*, documenting his four year collaboration with Lab architecture studio at Federation Square, Melbourne, was recently at the Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Paul is professorial research fellow at The Australian Centre, University of Melbourne.

Footnotes:

1. Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales*, New York, 1980, xxxi. 'Auditing Acoustic Ecology' was first presented as 'a kind of prologue' to the International Acoustic Ecology Symposium, held in Melbourne, Australia, in March 2003.
2. David Tomas, *Transcultural Space and Transcultural Beings*, Boulder, Coloardo, 1996, 120
3. Virginia Madsen, 'The Call of the Wild,' in *Uncertain Ground: Essays between Art + Nature*, ed. Martin Thomas, Sydney, 1999, 32.
4. *A Legend of Alexander & The Merchant and the Parrot*, trans. H. Mason, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1985, 65-111
5. F.Joseph Smith, *The Experiencing of Musical Sound*, New York, 1978, 255.
6. Anthony Seeger, 'Sound, Social Organisation, and Cosmology among the Suya Indians of Mato Grosso, Brazil,' paper presented at *Hearing Culture: New Directions in the Anthropology of Sound*, Oaxaca, 2002, under the auspices of the Wenner-Gren Foundation, 3.
7. Bruce R. Smith, 'Listening to the Wild Blue Yonder: The Challenges of Acoustic Archaeology, paper presented at *Hearing Culture: New Directions in the Anthropology of Sound*, Oaxaca, 2002, under the auspices of the Wenner-Gren Foundation, 14.