Extended Phonography: the Intertwining of Soundscape and Landscape

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Abstract

In this paper I propose the use of extended phonography as a methodology that introduces new forms of representation regarding the experience of place and its relationship to sound. The paper goes on to outline the conceptual framework of the site-specific project Constructing a Soundscape, discussing the work as a direct outcome of this methodology. This work, both artistic and discursive, attempts to address the need for a vocabulary that mirrors new aesthetics arising in sound art.

Keywords: soundscape, landscape, extended phonography, place, memory, site-specific
1. Introduction

Extended phonography is grounded on similarities between photography (image recording) and phonography (audio recording). Technological developments in recording methods used in both fields have allowed for augmented perspectives of time and space that extend beyond the capabilities of the human senses. Such parallels are described here through the aesthetic vocabularies used by both practices.

Exploring notions of veracity further problematizes the conflicting relationship between the roles of documentation and representation of the ephemeral in photography and phonography. These concepts are developed through critical reflection on Roger Fenton’s photograph(s) The Valley of the Shadow of Death, along with discourses expanded by Susan Sontag and Errol Morris. The issues raised by these photograph(s) are developed in the sonic domain through a historical contextual account of soundscape.

Following on from this discussion, I propose extended phonography as an integrated methodology, intertwining soundscape and landscape. By allowing concepts of soundscape and landscape to fold into each other, a dialogue is created between the act of listening, memory, place and sound; a hyper-reality composed by image, sound, and memory is weaved through the personal description of the narrator.

Constructing a Soundscape is then presented as an example of applied extended phonography. The viewer/listener is plugged directly into the framed environments, transforming recorded moments into the present moment by using memories and experiences to project and construct a personal, yet fictional, soundscape.

2. Photography and Phonography: beyond the “Original”

Photography and phonography always have had similar paths throughout history. Both practices started by substituting painting in the role of documenting “reality” through visual or audio representations, but as painting, they quickly departed from the presumptive veracity of mirroring reality becoming subjective portraits of the ephemeral.
Photography and phonography evolved to transcend the physical possibilities of the human body conferring both eye and ear the ability to go beyond. The rapid evolution of photographic and phonographic reproduction technologies contributed to new augmented perspectives of the “original”. The ability to frame time and space, and focus on details that go beyond the capability of human senses, has expanded in ways it would be difficult to imagine when photography and phonography emerged.

“Original” became subject to multiplication, as argued by Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. In both practices the experience of recording (image or sound) is now challenged and confronted by what we perceived as “original” or “real” - what we experienced - and the representation of the same. Here Benjamin suggests that scale and materiality will also add new meanings to the original context - photography as a print, as a reproduction on a newspaper, on a magazine, in an email, on the web - will bring new perspectives and will provide different information regarding the original context and its possible perception. The same has happen with recorded sound - whether in the form of field recording, Musique concrète, soundscape composition, sound installation, a CD - the representation and the perception of the sound source is transformed.

New sets of technical tools, for both photography and phonography, have changed concepts such as looking and listening by providing new perspectives. Both practices allowing one to articulate, at least partially, an experience of place:

The landscape is of course visible, but it only becomes visual when it has been rendered by some technique, such as of painting or photography, which then allows it to be viewed indirectly, by way of the resulting image which, as it were, returns the landscape back to the viewer in an artificially purified form, shorn of all other sensory dimensions. Likewise, a landscape may be audible, but to be aural it would have to have been first rendered by a technique of sound art or recording, such that it can be played back within an environment (such as a darkened room) in which we are otherwise deprived of sensory stimulus. (Ingold 2007).

In the 1970’s R. Murray Schaffer, within the Acoustic Ecology movement, coined the concept of Soundscape as part of a move to find a terminology that focused on sound and the

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1. e.g. binaural audio, macro photography, Audiboo and other locative media apps, pano and slo-mo iPhone capture, and general increases in recording resolutions.
act of listening. Soundscape paralleled the landscape, but in contrast was drawn to the aural rather than the visual. Although extremely necessary in this specific context, this perspective is fragmented. As Ingold suggest above, sound exists in an environment that is more than aural.

3. Photography and phonography: After the event

Even two hundred years after the development of photography, the aesthetic vocabulary used to address it as a technique is very much connected to painting: composition, light, colour, texture, landscape, portrait, and perspective (Sontag, 2005). As with painting, photography acts as a framing of space and time as perceived by the photographer. After the event has ended, the picture will continue existing as an objectification of that specific moment. It will then confer on the event an importance it would never otherwise enjoyed. The camera becomes the device that makes a personal perspective real. A photograph then goes beyond being the result of an encounter between an event and the photographer; it is an event in itself, a performance (ibid.).

Although the photographer is understood by some to be a technician who reveals an accurate interpretation of reality (Morris, 2011), it is clear that different photographers document the same subject in different ways. It is not the technical device that permits the representation, but instead, facilitates it. Thus, the supposition that a camera provides an impersonal and objective image yields to the fact that photography is not only a record but also an evaluation of the world through the eyes of the photographer (Sontag, 2005). Thus:

Photographs provide an alternative way of looking into history. Not into general history- but into a specific moment, a specific place. (Morris 2011, 31)

One can say a thin line is drawn between what are the possible roles of documentation and art. Concepts of veracity appear to cast a shadow on possible readings of a photographic work. A clear example of this is Roger Fenton’s photograph(s) The Valley of the Shadow of
Death. Roger Fenton was a pioneer in British photography well known for his war documentation with a special relevance in the Crimean War in the beginning of the 19th century.

![Image of The Valley of the Shadow of Death](image)

Figure 1. Rodger Fenton's *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (ON & OFF).

It’s black and white. It shows a dirt road cutting through this landscape. Just one dirt road between two hills. There’s nobody in the photograph. No birds, no trees, no people. There’s really nothing living in the photograph. Not even grass. Nothing. But as you stare at this road a little more closely you realize why nothing is living in the photograph, because this road is littered with cannon balls. Cannonballs everywhere. As soon as you notice them the photograph springs to life. You imagine this fusel on of artillery fire raining down on this landscape. This is one really fascinating thing about photography; it’s a time machine. There’s a physical connection between that photograph and that world.

(Radio Lab 2012)

Roger Fenton’s body of work and life has been subject to an extensive study made by both historians and photography critics. There is a wide discussion over the legitimacy of the above-mentioned photograph(s) as the documentation of a war scenario. The possibility that one of the most emblematic photographs of socio-political documentation was staged continues to be a subject of controversy.

Morris’s (2011) detailed research on this work reveals that there are two photographs of the exact same space, made in the exact same day, with the exact same tripod position, one after the other. One has its path filled with cannon balls and the other the cannon balls are placed on the left hand side of the road. Although the two negatives have been printed and exhibited, the photograph presented as the document of the situation, adding drama to the scenario, is the first one (ON).
As relevant as it might be in an historical perspective to analyse the veracity of these two photographs, and their social or political implications, one of the most interesting questions that arose from this doubt is the fact that photography is a subjective account of reality. This argument reinforces once more the role of the photographer as a creative artist who operates a technical tool, while making decisions that facilitate representations at times mythological in nature.

As with the act of recording in photography, the act of recording sound is consciously also a choice to describe a specific moment, a specific place. Some of the terminology used to describe sound, again, also has a parallel with photography or painting for that matter: composition, light, colour, texture, landscape (Ingold, op. cit.), portrait and perspective. The choice of a recording device, a wide set of microphone possibilities and their position in the landscape, work towards reinforcing the intended composition - the sound composition. As with photography, a sound recording will also act as a representation of a chosen frame of space and time as perceived by the listener. After the event has ended, the audio recording will continue existing as an objectification of that specific moment. The representation of reality will, as in photography, be molded according to a series of technical tools mastered by those operating them. Going once more back to Sontag, it will then confer on the event an importance it would never otherwise enjoyed. The sound recorder will become the device making real a personal perspective. A sound recording then goes beyond being the result of an encounter between an event and the sound recordist; it is an event in itself, a performance.

As the technical possibilities of a camera allow a different range of perspectives on space and time, a microphone creates similar possibilities. Whereas the camera position, the lenses’ characteristics and settings, generate endless possibilities to view and represent the experience of place, different microphones and their positions construct different possible perspectives over the same landscape. As argued by Francisco Lopez (1998) in “Environmental sound matter”:

Now that we have digital recording technology (with all its concomitant sound quality improvements) we can realize more straightforwardly that the microphones are - they always have been - our basic interfaces in our attempt at apprehending the sonic world around us, and also that they are non-neutral interfaces. Different microphones “hear” so differently that they can be considered as a first transformational step with more dramatic consequences than, for example, a further re-equalization of the recordings in the studio. Even al-
though we don't subtract or add anything we cannot avoid having a version of what we consider as reality.

The aesthetic options across the form of viewing or listening to place will then ultimately condition the achievable systems of generating meaning through selection, archiving, and framing. The act of recording (image or sound) can thus become a creative tool used to experience and articulate place. This raises questions of listening and engagement both from the point of view of the recordist and the other listeners.

4. Extended phonography in practice: Constructing a Soundscape - Site #1 and Constructing a Soundscape - Site #2 (Belfast, 2012)

Site #1 and Site #2 are here presented as examples of applied extended phonography. Each work contains a set of three 100x70cm digital photographs graphically manipulated through the addition of layered text that describe and tag the sonic environment. The text and graphical elements, anchor sounds to their locations, thus visually maintaining their relation with the surrounding space. The graphical representation then suggests that the sounds are anchored to their original source maintaining their relation with the objects and place: background and foreground. The narrator of the project is placed at the center of the image observing, listening and describing the sonic environment at the moment of the photographic 'click'.
Constructing a Soundscape - Site #1 and Constructing a Soundscape - Site #2 are composed by three sequential moments in one day - sunrise, middle of the day and evening. These moments frame transitions in the dynamic of sound events at times when they are most likely to occur in the daily cycle. The sequential framing suggests movement and duration.

This project engages with new experiences of space derived from methodologies embedded in cinematic hyperrealism and its concerns with everyday phenomena. Each image is composed as a medium-distance fixed frontal plan causing action to reside at times com-
pletely outside the frame (Margulies 1996). As Ben Singer (1989) describes the 1975 film by the Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman’s *Jeann Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*:

[…] with the result of fixed framing and distended temporality, we study the smallest detail of the material mise-en-scene. Our eye caresses the outlines of objects. It is an intimate and tactile sort of vision– we synaesthetically “feel” and manipulate objects.

Each three-image narrative entails more than a “documentary” record of reality. They seek to not only act as visual and aural analogies of the perceived reality, but also offer the possibility to construct new realities. This resonates with Michelangelo Antonioni’s story of photographic forensics in the film *Blow Up*:

Under one image there is always another one which is more faithful to reality, and under this one there is yet another, and again another under this last one, down to the true image of that absolute, mysterious reality that nobody will ever see. (Antonioni1996, 63).

It is arguable that this process of unveiling reality is possible with any image; however, this project explicitly encourages this form of engagement in both visual and aural domains.

*Constructing a Soundscape* started from my desire to find a methodology that could frame my artistic practice, while allowing me to articulate the experience of place by converging the visual and the aural. This methodology fed on my personal experience of place, but comes to life with the spectator’s own projections, memories and experiences; thus reconstructing the place I had experienced.

Following my interest in expanding the experience of place within the context of sound art, this paper suggests *extended phonography* as a methodology that has allowed the concepts of soundscape and landscape to fold into each other.

The paper methodically reflects on the experience of place through a system based on the parallels between photography and phonography by introducing soundscape as one of the elements within the perceived environment. Here I’ve proposed a possible way of transcending the fragmentation of the senses found in these two disciplinary practices, a resistance brought about through their combination and extension. This has provided an alternative way of representing a specific moment, a specific place: a hyper-reality composed by image, sound, memory and context, weaved through personal narratives.
REFERENCES


