

Imagine Sound Map – Time, Temporality and Temporariness in the Soundscape of OĀZE

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines temporality in soundscape, exposed as a deficiency in the practice of online co-created sound map making. Despite their ephemerality, soundscapes in such sound maps are often treated with the same approach as landscapes in visual cartography and presented as though they were the definitive sonic representations of the geographical locations. This inadequacy may serve as a point of departure for creating artistic works, in which the essence of such work relies on this apparent lack in representation of temporality in sound maps. I will exemplify this with an analysis of my sound map piece OĀZE, the principal concept of which consciously stems from addressing the mis-implementation of soundscape in sound maps and adopting temporality as an imperative feature.

KEYWORDS: Narrative, Memory, Representation, Virtual Interface.

1. Introduction

It's been nearly two decades since the practice of online co-created sound maps has emerged. These sound maps offer interesting links between geography and the sound of places, in theory. 'Place' being the keyword here, most of these sound maps foreground the site-specificity of soundscape from around the globe, while attempting to preserve constantly changing sonic environment. As useful as sound maps can be in that users can discover what soundscapes of never-visited, faraway places are like, they also exhibit many conceptual shortcomings, one of which is failing to consider that sound and soundscapes are time-based, temporal and temporary. One cannot expect to represent sound in the same way a visual map represents geography, as Holanda, Rebelo and Paz comment on this predicament.

The limitations of Cartesian representation of sound-place relationships arguably hamper the experiential approach to listening for which many soundmaps strive. For all its spatial authority, the map as a platform for placing sounds in space fails to capture the temporal and narrative characteristics of sound recordings. (Holanda et al. 2016, 80)

I will discuss this very concern within current sound map making practice and also illustrate my work OĀZE in relation to this topic. OĀZE is an imagined sound map that emerged from observing the lack of sound maps in representing the aspect of time and uses the configuration of a sound map as a stage to convey a narrative beyond sonic cartography.

2. Time

I ask a crude question to begin this discussion: what is time? Is it a phenomenon or a measurement? Does it exist, and if so, in what capacity? The answer will be something different to everyone including experts from various disciplines. To me, 'time' as an absolute thing doesn't exist; all I have is the present, and the continuous progression and accumulation of the "presents" constitute the passing of time, with the emphasis on 'passing'. Based on her experience as sound artist, Felicity Ford states "that sound recordings literally record time passing, and everything that takes place during that time making sound recordings."¹ Even by 'mapping sound' with the focus on the locality, the sound recordist always ends up capturing time in its passing form in addition to the soundscapes. Thus, a sound recording archives the moment at which the sound occurred, regardless of its primary purpose.

1. <http://www.sound-diaries.co.uk/previous-sound-diaries-projects/2010-2/uk-soundmap-sonic-time-capsule/>

This prompts us to regard soundscape recordings, not only in sound maps, but in all deployments, as inherent representations of ‘time’. And by attempting to create a geographically inspired platform, sound maps inadvertently contain an archive of time within the collected sound recordings. However, this aspect of time is rarely mentioned in current sound map making practice, which leads me to assume that it is not being acknowledged. Many sound maps promote ‘focused listening’ or ‘sonic awareness’ towards our spatial environment. Through our hard effort to encourage listening, to bring soundscapes from one place to another and to preserve the ephemeral in the eternal, the soundscapes often become fossilised in place; ‘time’ gets lost.

Montreal sound map², for instance, seems to make an effort to hold on to the aspect of time within soundscapes by including the option to categorise the archived soundscapes by date. However, no two sound recordings in the sound map originate from one location, making it a successful ‘sonic time capsule’ as they intended,³ yet still lacking in translating the fluidity of soundscapes.

An example of the most common configuration used for online sound maps can be found in Radio Aporee Global Sound Map⁴: an interactive visual map with marks for sound recordings that can be played back with a mouse click. The literal experience of looking at such a sound map reminds me of something very elementary: that time, unlike place, is invisible. We can see and touch places whereas we can only sense time at best. Within the practice of sound mapping, a primarily time-based action of field recording is deployed to capture the geographical places; the visible. While it is an ambitious undertaking, the predicament lies in this question: what is the appropriate method to translate this concept by evidently appreciating both elements, ‘place’ as well as ‘time’? In such a configuration for sound maps, this ‘visible and invisible’ are presented as parallel components: the soundscape is literally positioned ‘on top of’ the landscape as seen from an aerial view. The purpose of the visual map is to be used as a guidance system that leads the users to the final targets: the sound recordings. These two elements coexist, but never merge; remain disjointed, which brings me to question the feasibility of this configuration in the first place. The visual maps that are incorporated in sound maps are those of a traditional kind: two-dimensional representations depicting three-dimensional realities. They represent the actual by being rendered into drawn or photographed versions of the realities. Yet the sound recordings that are presented on these geographical representations are rather excerpts of the actual than renditions; they are examples; ‘representative’ of the soundscapes that may be actually occurring. While the visible and invisible both are presented through representations, the implemented means for these representations are of dissimilar types.

2. <http://montrealsoundmap.com>

3. *Ibid.* about

4. <http://aporee.org/maps/>

In order to conceive of a sound map that can overcome the incoherence in the methods of presentation between the geographic and sonic, finding the appropriate way to ‘represent’ and ‘present’ sound must be in our interest.

Through my sound map OAZE, created as a standalone application, I do not look for an alternative way to represent soundscapes, but rather take advantage of this deficiency observed in the prevalent configuration of sound maps. In OAZE, which is based in an imagined place, time consciously exists, but gradually gets erased through a certain behaviour of the sound map. It comprises twelve locations portrayed in stylised abstraction that contain soundscapes, each of which is set in twelve different moments in time. The audience is invited to choose to listen to the soundscapes in any preferred order between the twelve locations, effectively determining the sequence in which they experience those moments in time. This is executed by each soundscape integrating a voice narration as first person narrative that tells a short description and observation of the exact moments, during which the soundscape is occurring. Each soundscape depicts a situation from a different moment in time to the rest, accumulating to reveal twelve sporadic, chronological moments out of a person’s life. However, this is presented in such a way that the audience would experience the entire narrative in a non-linear order. By exploring the sound map and the soundscapes, the audience unintentionally moves through time. Through moving back and forth in time, time is erased.

3. Temporality

In his untreated field recording cycle ‘A year’s hours behind my father’s house’⁵, composer Ludwig Berger explores the temporality of soundscapes in a rather literal way, in which he traces time in one place by time-lapsing the respective sound recordings. He has made sound recordings in the exact same place for one year, four times a day, for one minute each time. One recording per week for each time of the day was chosen and sewn together to result in four twelve-minute soundscape compositions.⁶ Although the notion of ‘place’ in relation to soundscape is indispensable in this work, it acts only as a fixture to ‘time’; the fluid, which is the actual subject of his exploration. The work acknowledges the temporal aspect of soundscapes within a geographical fixture. Could this be a model for a possible sound map: providing a representation of the place linked with a variety of locational sound recordings to create a sonic ‘overview’?

Clearly, landscape changes as well and should be regarded as temporal. However, the rate at which it alters is much slower in comparison to soundscape. Soundscape may not even be described as ‘changing’, as it does not take one shape: in order to change, an origin

5. <http://www.impulsivehabitat.com/releases/ihab098.htm>

6. Ibid.

must exist; a formation; a structure – soundscape doesn't possess any feature as such. It is absolutely fluid, fluent and evanescent. Yet, within the configuration of a sound map, soundscape is treated with the same assumption as landscape: as fixed and unaltering, and only gradually transforming. Soundscape as captured by a recording device will never recur naturally in the same iteration.

To acknowledge the continuous altering of the soundscapes, one can consider the constant streaming of the sound as an option for sound maps, as 'Locusstream Soundmap' does with their live worldwide open microphones.⁷ This sound map enables users to stream soundscapes from around the world in real time. I can be sitting in my room in Ireland at dusk and listen to the morning soundscape of California. It can provide worthwhile sonic information with the right weather condition and input level of microphones. However, the incoherence in the presentation between the visible and the invisible still persists. And the more time one spends engaging with it, the more it becomes confusing whether the project is a sound map or simply a live broadcasting service.

In OĀZE, the notion of soundscapes being temporal representations is reinforced, by which the work takes advantage of the fact that the occurrence of an event is necessarily linked with a place and a time, with the focus on 'time'. The soundscape recordings introduced in OĀZE are paired with short stories, each of which implies the different age of the protagonist in the narrative.

The following is an example to illustrate the concept behind temporalising the narrative fragments:

I don't fancy school trips, but I like sleeping in this lighthouse. Everyone else is already in bed downstairs.

From such a fragment, the listener is invited to deduce that the protagonist is in 'school' that takes overnight school trips and subsequently the approximate age of the protagonist. Here are two narrative fragments that exhibit a linking feature to each other.

Usually I would come here with mama. But the last few times, I'm with papa, because mama needs to rest quite a lot, because she's carrying a baby in her body. [...] I hope I'll have a sister, because I already have a brother.

My sister is covered in confetti now, and so is her brand new husband.

7. <http://locusonus.org/soundmap/051/>

These two fragments above exist as independent, ostensibly unrelated entities within the sound map. However, by connecting them with each other with regards to temporality, the listener can assume how many years apart from each other these two stories may take place. In such a way, each and every narrative entity is temporalised, creating the illusion of time traveling within the sound map. Through its exploration, the audience ultimately ends up indirectly experiencing the life of a stranger in its entirety, but in a fractured form, which is reconstructed through storytelling with its basis in the soundscapes. In *OAZE*, the role of soundscapes as archives of time is acknowledged through such narrativised temporalities.

4. Temporariness

Archived sound recordings in sound maps commonly vary in length from 30 seconds to five minutes. This, in reverse, reveals the minimum duration of time, during which the sound recordist had decided to keep the recorder activated. The sound recordist was temporarily in the same place as the retrospectively captured soundscape. The sound recording is the evidence of her/his presence, because soundscapes are temporal; constantly moving, which makes them also temporary; constantly changing. So, what is it that enables us to catch an aural glimpse of the soundscapes despite their temporariness?: our presence in them. While it is possible to virtually experience soundscapes through such means as sound maps, within a natural circumstance one would have to be present in a place in person; in flesh and blood, in order to come across certain soundscapes. When one listens to recorded soundscapes, it is the sound recordist who surrogates this activity of being in a place for the listener. The sound recordist has already decided when to press record and when to stop recording. And the sonic experience of any soundscape depends on this decision of the sound recordist, as does the representation of the soundscapes in sound maps. The subjectivity of an individual cannot be disregarded in making sound maps, which also speaks against presenting the soundscapes with the same method as geography in visual maps. Certain landscapes, for as long as they do not alter, will be measured by the same number in dimensions, regardless of the time and the individual in charge. Is it possible to find such communally agreed measurements to represent soundscapes and present them so that everyone will understand it unanimously? Furthermore, one of the aims of the current sound maps, which is to preserve objective representations of soundscapes as in visual maps, prohibits the potential sound recordists from capturing something human; personal; subjective. Artist and researcher Jacqueline Waldoock expresses her observation and criticism towards the specific nature of the sound maps:

The very act of recording involves a series of personal choices and an individualized frame. Despite this, the recorder takes great care not to appear in the recording. Thus, the recordings have a poignant silence, that of the sound-seekers hiding themselves in the frame, the desire to capture the sounds of the other and not their own. The counterargument to this is that the sound recordings are snapshots to be heard and taken in the same way that snapshot pictures are viewed and captured, the photographer never appearing in the image. The question then arises: should the aural reflect, so precisely, the capturing of the visual? (Waldock 2011)

Sound maps have set out with the purpose of preserving the sounds around us; from our daily lives. But how efficiently can this be achieved, if 'people' were excluded from our lives? Without people, who would even hear the soundscapes? Unlike landscape, which can be observed from a distance, soundscape requires closeness; immersion. The existence of soundscape can be only proved through the involvement of personal presence.

In *OAZE*, this subjectivity, which is usually determined by the role of a sound recordist inconspicuously, is embraced and played out by the protagonist in the narrative: the audience obtains a window into a few minutes of soundscape that the protagonist allows them to listen in; to experience the soundscape through the metaphoric ears of the protagonist. They hear what she hears, and they hear about what she sees, what she thinks, what she's experienced and remembers in relation to the present moment, at which the soundscape is occurring. In order to achieve this effect, the narration is established in present tense, whenever it actually may be – whether in the present, past or future. It emphasises the temporariness of soundscapes and furthermore of being. This prompts each soundscape to take place in the present and subsequently all soundscapes from different moments in time to occur in the present. Not unlike when we recall memories, time is erased. Sounds, occurrences, thoughts – everything happens in the present, and present is only possible in person. The present happens in its temporariness, and the same applies to sound; hearing sound is being.

5. Timelessness

Within a virtual world where there is no such a thing as time, through the usage of the present tense, *OAZE* invites the audience to be suspended in time. As the protagonist tells them fragments out of her presents within the sonic environment, the lines between the present realities and frozen memories get blurred. Memories are contained within a body, as sound recordings are in a sound map, and exist in everlasting present from the moment they are engraved inside us in their timelessness. In *OAZE*, nothing in fact is 'real'; it exists

in a virtual space as an imagined place with appropriated soundscapes and fictitious history. As a representation of imagination, this map does become more than the territory. Through the visits of the audience and their actual time spent in this virtual place, OÁZE ‘becomes’ real.

6. Outroduction

The practice of sound map making is in its developing stage. Contemporary geographical cartography is a result of research and explorations that have been done for centuries out of necessity and desire to find a communally apprehensive method to represent geographical information. In comparison, sonic cartography is like a toddler; it is still finding its appropriate way to behave and appear, through many experimentations by artists and researchers. With some imagination and determination, it may succeed in being shaped into a logical, applicable, sensible and effective entity. It may find its way to appropriately represent and present soundscapes, to merge with the way the locational information is presented if necessary, and be more than a trendy addition inserted onto an already established interactive visual map. As a contribution to this discourse, I can offer neither a solution nor an alternative. I merely present how I imagined one to be and how I took advantage of the current configuration of sound maps including its shortcomings for an artistic exploration. By doing so, I was able to find a way to use the sound map as a platform to execute something beyond sonic cartography.

Putting the predicament of the configuration in question aside, sound maps have their merits in engaging communities, offering to widen the scope of exploration into faraway places, or being a methodology to archive sounds in a visually enhanced way. They enable one to listen in and imagine what it would be like to be in those never-visited places; they let one daydream. Anything that allows us to do that is worthwhile occupying ourselves with. We do not need to only worry about preserving the soundscapes and concentrate on the future-oriented qualities in making sound maps, when, I’m sure, we can find meaning in them that will enrich our lives in the present.

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