

A Commentary on Soundscape Perception
(Addressing Question #4)

By: Hogan W. Ingram

Sound and the Moving Image
Robert Jones
University of Wales Trinity Saint David
BA Film & TV
Student N°1804353
Word Count: 2,243

Introduction

It is obvious that films benefit or are at least subject to the effect of soundscape design, and accordingly, there may be several avenues with which to discuss this relationship. This commentary, however, will discuss the mechanics of this relationship in a somewhat minor capacity, in order to address a separate but connected matter. This does not mean to disgrace the significance of soundscape design to film, or vice versa, nor completely ignore the demand for a direct analysis of the relationship between soundscape design and film. But, it means to steer the discussion in order to address a corresponding issue regarding soundscapes as art and the nature of how they are perceived as such. This, in turn, will correspond to the relationship of soundscapes alongside film, though it will be from a somewhat obscure angle.

With this laid down, let the definition of Soundscape be defined in the following terms: quite simply, soundscape is a sonic expression of some sort of real or imagined thing, an expression which should be boundless in terms of what it might express. The big wigs and veterans of soundscape design (i.e., the World Soundscape Project) have agreed to define soundscape as something that is created with the acknowledgement that it should convey the relationship between human and *surrounding environment* (Schafer, 1996). This definition is similar to that which I presumed, however the slight juxtaposition of the two is an important distinction. I refrained from including the term environment, and used thing in its stead. This was calculated in order to avoid and point out the connotation that a soundscape is a slightly altered sonic expression of the *agreed upon* real or physical realm. I believe that soundscapes may express environments beyond any agreed upon physical space, and therefore the limiting factor of our associations with the word environment, as something which is fixed and often synonymous with nature, is potentially detrimental to this discussion. It is for this same reason that I prefer to use the word soundscape over the synonym acoustic ecology.

If I wish to create a soundscape that is expressive of the imagined realm of time and space that lies in between my thoughts, or any other absurd place, I should not be deterred by the doubt of whether that is environmental or ecological. And, though I recognize that this distinction is mostly semantic, the point is that soundscapes must be defined openly and geared toward true experimentation such as all art should.

With that being said, perhaps it is time to define the actual question at hand. I was confronted with the postulate that an artist should cultivate a 'critical awareness of acoustic ecologies' (or soundscapes) when partaking in the production of sound art, specifically for films. I was intrigued with the undertone of the phrase 'critical awareness', and from it recognized a coding of art and soundscape that symbolically, through the academic connotation of the phrase, seems to me to remove the value of art which is may

alternatively founded on principles of spontaneity, instinct, and most importantly candor, things I find invaluable to art. And, even though this observation may be construed as an overly critical reading of a rather general and well intended question, I view it as an important point to contend, given the fact that art has the tendency to be a diluted away from true expressions by the over incorporation of academic agendas and other outside structures during the creating, appreciating and analyzing of art. I have been prone to this myself and speak from experience. However, I in no way dispute the applying scholarly practice to art but, I advocate that less structured expressions shouldn't be belittled or set aside and not given a fair chance due to academic language or thinking we sometimes get caught up in. It may also be argued that in a overly-programmed practice, the potential originality of the artist including their "bad" expressions might become buried below the outer crust of the artist without discussion or mediation, and thus censorship occurs of the truths which people may be living by. Therefore, in order to demonstrate the effectiveness and advantage of un-*critically aware* art (pardon me), I would like to present the thoughts and practices of some choice soundscape artists in order to demonstrate the sensitivity that they have for expressing sound and space, despite a clear separation from any academic, political, or otherwise influenced intent. This I think, will show how critical awareness is not the best descriptor for a great sound designer, but that perhaps vulnerable, honest, or sensitive is.

JOHN LUTHER ADAMS

John Luther Adams is a contemporary American composer who is best known for his orchestral compositions which try to express and emulate his deep and carefully collected impressions of the natural world which surrounds him (Adams, 2013). His work ultimately results in unprecedented and magnificent orchestral soundscapes such as his piece *Become Ocean* which notably was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2014. Adams is a meticulous artist, and in many ways is structured by his own devised methods, he is in fact, by his own words, "a very rigorous composer, in fact you could almost say some of [his] pieces are like algorithms in the strictness of their formal processes" (Adams, 2013). However, this strictness should not be misconstrued as overly aware of itself or its outside impact. Adams is devoted to experimentation, and these methods are a conduit for a process which is about finding the road to pure and true expression of the places that inspire him to create. Adams himself, a known advocate for the environment and conservation, recognizes the need for art to be independent from the influence of outside agendas. He made this clear in a 2014 interview with the BBC where he was asked to speak on weather music can be used to convey political points.

More often than not, political art fails as politics, and all too often it fails as art.
To reach its fullest power, to be most moving and most fully useful to us, art must

be itself. If my work doesn't function powerfully as music, then all the poetic programme notes and extra-musical justifications in the world mean nothing. When I'm true to the music, when I let the music be whatever it wants to be, then everything else – including any social or political meaning – will follow. (Adams, 2014)

Here Adams makes an important distinction. He does not reject the fact that art can and is political, but he holds firm the principle that his art is not created as something political. In other words, great sound art should find its origins in a much more subtle or nuanced stew of inspiration than simply the fleeting political and symbolic ongoing of the modern day. Art is political, but true expression is more complex than politics or other semantics, and in order to achieve that, one needs to look beyond those things. In this way, Adam's art reaches its 'fullest power' because he leaves ambition and agenda behind when he decides to interpret the ocean or the birds or the mountains.

JACK KEROUAC

Soundscape poetry, at least by that name, is something that isn't a 'significant' genre within the current or possibly any cultural epoch, though I may just be totally ignorant to the budding underground scene. Nevertheless, I would like to talk about the work of 'soundscape' or jazz poet Jack Kerouac, and specifically one poem of his and his spontaneous approach to the composition of said poem. The poem is '*SEA*' *Sounds of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur* circa 1960, and to provide a quick sense of the poem here's a choice stanza:

Our armies of
anchored seaweed in the
coves give of the smell
of jellied salt-----
Reach, reach, some leaves
havent hastened near
enuf-----Roll, roll, purl
the sand shark floor
a greeny pali andarva
-----Ah back-----Ah forth-----
A shish-----Boom, away,
doom, a day-----Vein we
firm-----The sea is We-----
Parle, parle, boom the
earth-----Arree-----Shaw,

Sho, Shoosh, flut,
ravad, tapavada pow,
coof, loof, roof, -----
No,no,no,no,no,no-----
Oh ya, ya, ya, yo, yair-----
Shhh-----
(Kerouac, 2006, p.173-4)

Yes, Kerouac interpreted the sounds of the sea at Big Sur, but also we hear the sounds of the sea as they are interspersed with the voice(s) inside his head. Both kinds of sounds are present to him and both are recorded. The combination of these spaces and places, the Pacific Ocean, the Big Sur coastline, and Kerouac's mind, create a compound of the inner and the outside which is the Human Experience and thus a part of our relationship to sound. This combination is enabled by a method/philosophy Kerouac practiced which he called 'spontaneous composition' which has many recommendations but is essentially rooted in improvised, unplanned and jazz-like writing which in turn looks to result in honesty, and personal truth (Kerouac, 2006, p. 92-93). So, if this is a great poem, and I think it is great, then here Kerouac has created a great and candid image of the sea through the use of candid techniques which are devoid of a conscious agenda to achieve anything other than Jack's true expression of the sea at Big Sur. Therefore, we see in this poem the expression through sound which is totally free of intent or awareness and whose quality may speak for itself.

HILDEGARD WESTERKAMP

The last of the artists which I'll present is Hildegard Westerkamp, soundscape artist extraordinaire, pioneer, and one of the foremost teachers within the field (Duhautpas, F. and Solomos, M., 2014). Westerkamp's work is situated around real environments and often her process involves the direct recording and manipulating of sounds from locations in order to express them in musical composition (Westerkamp, 2016). What's interesting about Westerkamp is that she has a sort of fixed agenda for her art. This is to "build awareness of our sound environments and their acoustic qualities, aiming to understand our own listening relationships and interactions with these environments" (Duhautpas, F. and Solomos, M., 2014). I would argue, that this agenda, is very similar to the argument which I am presenting. She's found an avenue for expression which she was conditioned to ignore and is now attempting to let others in on the beautiful secret, a secret which opens up many artistic possibilities (Westerkamp, 2016). In this sense although she has a manifesto for making a certain impact with her art, it is excusable here, because she merely is promoting a deviation from structure, and a liberation of expression, as opposed to a confinement. She in fact does not ask that you hear how she hears but asks simply

that you take the time to hear. Period. Therefore her work supports my taking issue with the connotation of 'critical awareness'. Like Kerouac and Adams, she does not create with a conscious analysis of the merits and faults of her creation, but rather she creates new things without abandon for any direct cause and again, the results speak for themselves.

CONCLUSION

Sound design within film obviously corresponds to the images with which it is paired, and this creates the illusion that the sounds and the projected image are one thing, but I ask, why does this mean that sounds must always be consistent to the image? Due to many years of cultural production, popular film has established limits for which sounds can be paired with what images. In this way, film soundscape is very susceptible to the interference of an overly curated production and a lack of artistic revelation. I observe this constantly when I watch popular films where I rarely recognize an excess of originality or new interpretation within the sound design. Yet, I don't think that this is due to a lack of artistry, rather it is the result of a plethora of agendas which direct sound designers not to deviate from the norm, nor take any significant artistic liberty. Of course there are cases where perhaps this formula is part of the artistic plan but it shouldn't be so dominant as to discourage other expressions. This is precisely why I chose to argue against the wording to the question I was posed, because before discussing the relationship between soundscape and moving image, I felt it was necessary to break down the misconceptions which cause artistic discrepancy within the field of soundscape and thus film sound design. It is important to recognize that there is an alternative to the norm, there is new and unexplored possibilities, and sometimes when they are pushed through they turn out brilliantly. An example of such a film is Gus Van Sant's 2003 film *Elephant* which took a chance and used the work of soundscape artists including Hildegard Westerkamps and her piece *Beneath The Forrest Floor* as the sound for scenes reliving the Columbine High School massacre. This created a unique expression of the event which helped separate it from the narrative which it had been so associated with by the media. This was an original idea, found no doubt through experimentation and it was able to create a different and still true perception of the events. This example, again, demonstrates the power of spontaneous and uninhibited expression to films sound or otherwise, highlighting itself as an invaluable and thus unignorable device of art.

Work Cited

Adams, J. L. (2013) Interviewed by Ivan Hewett for The Telegraph, 3 July. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalmusic/10116759/John-Luther-Adams-interview.html>

Adams, J. L. (2014) Interviewed by Rebecca Franks for Classical-music.com, 11 November. Available at: <http://www.classical-music.com/article/john-luther-adams>

Duhautpas, F. and Solomos, M., 2014. Hildegard Westerkamp and the Ecology of Sound as Experience. Notes on Beneath the Forest Floor. Soundscape, The Journal of Acoustic Ecology, 13.

Kerouac, J., 2006. Big Sur, London: Harper Perennial.

Sant, G.V., 2003. Elephant. USA: Fine Line Features.

Schafer, R.M., 1993. The soundscape.

Westerkamp, H. (2016) Interviewed by Rodrigo Sacic for Designing Sound. 5 December. Available at: <http://designingsound.org/2016/12/05/sonic-interactions-with-the-world-an-interview-with-hildegard-westerkamp/>