

John Drever, "Field Recording Centred Composition Practices: Negotiating the 'Out-there' with the 'In-here'", *Routledge Companion to Sounding Art*, 2017.

Questions

This problematic snowballs a constellation of practice-based questions, the priority of which oscillate in the field:

- What, why and for whom am I recording (Drever 2002)?
- Where do I point the microphone? Should I let sounds diffract around me, or should I maneuver around the pattern of point, line and plane sound sources, evoking a vicarious soundwalk in the manner of Steven Feld's simulation of the Bosavi's sensation of "lift-up-over sounding" where he invites the listener to "concentrate on the way sound is both fixed and moves around you" (Feld 2001: 5)?
- Am I poised to record the mundane, the in-context, the seasonal, the out-of-the-ordinary, the exotic, the particular, the audiogenic, the "you should have been there"? Or shall I switch from the acoustic atmosphere altogether with the aid of the coil pick-up, and tune into prevailing electromagnetic fields, an urban resource that has been exquisitely exploited in the *Five Electrical Walks* (2003–2007) of Christina Kubisch.
- Do I prioritize sounds for their potential to transmit meaning, for their affect or for their sonic qualities emulating the fictional surveillance expert Harry Caul, in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974)? Known as the best in the business with custom-made apparatus to boot, as a professional he eschews meaning (at the opening of the film at least), stating: "I don't care what they are talking about. All I want is a nice fat recording."

- Do I surrender to the predicament of naïve ears, or do I endeavor in the noble words of Peter Cusack on discussing his approach to field recording within the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, “to inform myself as far as possible, but also to listen to the small voices, to the environment itself, to those whose personal knowledge of the area goes back generations, to those on the front line and to those whose lives have been changed forever by events over which they have no control” (Cusack 2012: 18)?
- Do I take a premeditated, systematic and/or deliberate attitude to field recording or assume an improvisatory and spontaneous attitude or simply be open to the vagaries of the environment at the mercy of serendipity?
- Following Dallas Simpson’s binaural recording method, to “explore and liberate a variety of these unexpressed ‘sound bodies’ . . . transforming that which was potential and pre-existent into the realm of acoustic visibility” (Simpson 2000: 5), should I intervene and interact in the situation to stimulate a sonic response, rendering the field (sound source(s) within aural architecture(s)) audible to the microphone, or shall I remain ostensibly passive?
- What ties should I have with the context being studied: inhabitant, collaborator, sojourner, guest, tourist? If “tourist,” shall I consume place with my hearing in a parallel fashion to my sight, adopting an aural equivalent to John Urry’s notion of the tourist’s gaze:

Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through day-dreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasure, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered. Such anticipation is constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, newspapers, TV, magazines, records and videos which construct that gaze.

(Urry 1995: 132)

- What of my attitude to permission, privacy, ethics, copyright, and paternity?
- Is it necessary to annotate my recordings with metadata: date, location, weather conditions, habitat, microphone model or non-hierarchical user’s tag?
- What about overdubbing a voiceover providing a running commentary or an *in situ* voiceover: “to speak from inside the soundscape” (Westerkamp 1998: 55)?
- Do I treat human utterance differently and do I need to comprehend the language (over)heard? Consider Canetti’s approach in his travelogue to Marrakesh, where he actively shunned speech intelligibility as a strategy of unmediated sensuous engagement:

What is there in language? What does it conceal? What does it rob one of? During weeks spent in Morocco I made no attempt to acquire either Arabic or any of the Berber languages. I wanted to lose none of the force of those foreign-sounding cries. I wanted sounds to affect me as much as lay in their power, unmitigated by deficient and artificial knowledge on my part.

(Canetti 2003: 23)

- Should I take *in situ* calibrated sound level readings, or should I sensuously imbibe sound pressure and creatively interpret and discuss perceived loudness back in the editing suite, one of the themes explored in Westerkamp’s *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989)?

- Should I adopt a clandestine approach to field recording and attempt to surreptitiously blend in or take on the persona of a lost boom operator (impersonating the sound engineer Philip Winter in Wim Wenders' *Lisbon Story* (1994))? Could I monitor my embedded microphone remotely, freeing the immediate locality of my bodily presence, allowing "unusual sounds [to be] recorded—such rarities as a bird singing very close to the microphone just when a street saxophonist finishes a piece (and in harmony!!)" (Westerkamp 1994: 90–91)?
- When I move, I generate noise—keys and coins jingling, I clear my throat, my shoes squeak, I breathe and swallow. Likewise I collect a lot of machine noise caused by wind, fumbling (a concept articulated by Tine Blom working in freezing conditions in the mountains above Lillehammer), cables and digital distortion from peaking levels—but shouldn't my presence and the presence of the technology be rendered audible on the recording, framing "the framer as he or she frames the other" (Foster 1996: 203)?
- Shouldn't I point towards the process of my audio-phonic mediatization? I could sonically reveal the presence of the highly visible fluffy boom, taking lead from a novelty film comprised of documentary outtakes in Johan van der Keuken's *Amsterdam Afterbeat* (1996). The work is comprised entirely of edits of the moment at the end of each location recording when the camera frames the boom operator visibly and audibly by biffing the microphone for the sake of audio-visual synching?
- Is there an onus on the phonographer to be faithful to the place or event, space, and time of the recording (audio *vérité*), or how about free association, or the concoction of impossible combinations of time and place: acoustic fact or sonic fiction?
- What tense should the work convey: the past continuous, the present continuous or couldn't the composition look into the future and forewarn of a future dystopia, such as the Positive Soundscapes Project commissions, Chris Watson's *York June 2030* (2009) and Yannick Dauby's *Taipei 2030* (2009)?
- What of my approach to editing: collage/decollage, montage, assemblage? Do I need to edit at all, remembering the "perfect hour" of Les Gilbert's "not spliced" *Kakadu Billabong* (1987)? Must I conceal my micromanaged soundscape comprised of the myriad of tiny edits by crafted cross-fades, interpolation or concatenation, or leave the edits exposed by abrasive hard cuts or interspersed by digital silence? Do I make my edits on the fly in the field, or rely heavily on postproduction? And what of compression, normalization, mastering?
- How do I understand in representational terms the chain of listening, recording, storage and playback: analogue to digital transfer, simulacrum or hyper-real, forensic data, trace, evocation, telepresence, animate, metaphor, mnemonic, *memento mori*, mechanical reproduction, rhetorical, fetishist, indexical, umbilical? In sharp contrast to the dominant tendencies in phonography, Chris DeLaurenti, who takes an explicit activist stance, talks of not being "interested in capturing a place or building a documentary archive . . . I'm venturing in the world to teach myself to listen" (DeLaurenti 2014).
- How do I make the transition from field recording(s) to composition?