Alien intimacies: hearing science fiction narratives in Hildegard Westerkamp's *Cricket Voice* (or 'I don't like the country, the crickets make me nervous')*

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This paper discusses listener responses to a contemporary soundscape composition based on the sound of a cricket. Soundscape composers make works based on everyday sounds and sound environments, usually recorded by themselves (Truax 1984, 1996). While the composer of this piece aims to bring listeners closer to the sounds around them by creating audio pieces based on these sounds (Westerkamp 1988), some listeners feel fear and anxiety rather than the heightened closeness and understanding that she wishes listeners to experience. I compare the sound structure of *Cricket Voice* with close listening to excerpts of the film soundtrack of Ridley Scott's *Alien* as well as a short excerpt from the soundtrack of the *X Files*, discussing how science fiction film and television soundtracks index sonic intimacy with different intent from that of Westerkamp, and raising questions about how such approaches to intimacy might simultaneously reflect and intensify urban anxieties about the sounds of 'alien' species that are associated with wilderness environments.

Cricket Voice was the first work by soundscape composer Hildegard Westerkamp that I heard, on community radio several years ago. It impressed me with its simultaneous sense of space and closeness, with its evocation of vast and intimate landscapes, and by the use of the sound of a cricket song as its fundamental source. Although at the time I did not know how Westerkamp had constructed it, I had the initial impression that all of the other sounds were somehow related to this recognisable cricket sound. This excited me, and galvanised me: I knew that I wanted to work with everyday sounds that I could record myself. Since then, I have continued to record the sounds around me, to create audio pieces that refer to everyday worlds, and to imagined alternatives, by dwelling on and with the ambient sounds of daily life.

Westerkamp composes primarily from field recordings that she has done herself (Westerkamp 1994). Her work refers to specific places (Robertson 1982), and is associated with the aims of sound ecology (Westerkamp 1988a):[1] she aims to sensitise listeners to the sounds of the environment around them, and to bring attention to small sounds that are often unnoticed. She does this by composing soundscape pieces that feature unchanged field recordings which include close amplification of small sounds, juxtaposed and layered with processed versions of the same sounds. In the case of *Cricket Voice*, the sound of a single cricket is slowed down and filtered, to create sounds that are like vocals and others more like heartbeats,[2] shifting and moving around the listener, sometimes close and sometimes farther off, accompanied by the original cricket call, a kind of immersion in a world of cricket voices. Even though she wishes to increase listeners' understanding of and intimacy with their auditory surroundings, some listeners feel alienated by this kind of sound world, as I discovered when I played this piece to a number of listeners and asked for their responses.

I refer to listener responses in my sound analyses because they allow me to experience productive confusion: often a group of people will respond to the work in ways that I do not anticipate: they hear the sounds differently from me, because of their varied backgrounds and experiences. Productive confusion leads to more subtle and nuanced understandings of how sound works affect people, and how their responses may be shaped by listening in other mediated contexts. I played *Cricket Voice* for several undergraduate music classes, for a group of radio artists at a community radio station, and also collected responses from internet lists devoted to sound ecology and electroacoustic music. I asked for written, open-ended responses.[3] While many of these

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[1]This is a growing field of research, supported by an international organisation called the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology. They have an impressive website with research articles and links to recordists' pages: interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/WFAEHomePage.

[2]An excerpt from the liner notes: 'Slowed down, it sounds like the heartbeat of the desert, in its original speed it sings of the stars'.

[3]When I present a work to a listening group, I ask them for an open-ended response. Rather than asking a particular question, or using a survey, I ask them to write down any image, memory, or reaction that they may have to the piece. This can be in any form: prose, poetry, drawing, point form. This open-endedness is important to my work because it encourages surprise and exploration: rather than answering

expressed reactions that resonated with my own feelings of spaciousness and intimacy, a significant number reflected a range of different feelings.

Several reactions to this piece indicate feelings of being trapped, lost, captured or afraid. Some describe these feelings growing thoughout the piece. Fredd,[4] a composition student relates: 'I imagine being trapped within an ice cave, water dripping off the icicles and into a vast glacial pool' (Fredd, 23m, Queen's electroacoustic composition). A radio artist says 'I feel myself walking through a storm after dark. My body is bent against the wind, and I am fighting to get home. I have a vague, growing, sense of unease, maybe a fear that I can't attach a cause to' (Nameless, 22m, Trent Radio Art Day). Beth, a music theory student, says: 'Like a windy cliff looking over the ocean in a scary movie. Hair blowing in the wind, kind of oblivious to everything that is happening, until you begin to run from the cliff into the forest. As if you are on drugs for the whole time – everything is distorted' (Beth, 32f, Waterloo theory). Another student in Beth's class responds: 'Rain, heartbeat like pattern, changed from 'rainforest' mood to something else 'horror'. Heartbeat pattern is gone – sound reminiscent of a helicopter. Changes to sounds which sound very ''electronic'' ' (Caum, 22m, Waterloo theory class). Note that in this latter quote, the listener talks about a change from rainforest to horror as he also hears the sounds becoming more 'electronic'. The heartbeat pattern, which is actually an electronically processed cricket sound, is associated with nature (rainforest). Ironically, when the heartbeat pattern is gone, there are actually more untreated acoustic sounds used in the piece, while this listener hears a helicopter, and more electronic sounds.

One of these descriptions is a fairly detailed narrative, involving an alien kidnapping. Mario Welsh says:

> I see myself taken aboard an alien spacecraft. The low rumblings of the middle section are the whine/roar of the drive and I am caged, numbed but not particularly feeling fear. The throb of the spacecraft leaves and I am surrounded by noise. The alien, cricket sounds multiply and I am examined, tagged, whatever. I am anxious to leave and bang repeatedly on the plastic-like confines of my containment. The alien tells me to be quiet [almost recognizable speech]. I am disciplined but continue to bang a couple of times. There is no pain, or intense sensory input. As if I am viewing from a distance. I hear my footsteps as I stumble away at the end. (Mario Welsh, 22m, Queen's electroacoustic composition)

This is not the only reference to alien cricket life-forms. Seven listeners refer in general to alien encounters, outer space or a sense of being 'out of this world'. Two others refer specifically to the aliens being giant crickets: Raen (22f, Waterloo theory class) says 'apocalyptic – crickets come to devour. Reminiscent of old sci-fi movies – attack of giant crickets – but presented in a very real, serious way' (Jamca, 33f, Waterloo theory class) writes: 'I'm in a maze trying to get out – every corner I turn I see a huge cricket in front of me blocking my way'.

These reactions were so different from my own – my sense of ecstasy and freedom on hearing this piece – that at first I could not understand them at all. It was recently, when I was watching *On the Waterfront*, that I began to speculate about where they might originate. *On the Waterfront*, a film made in 1954, uses innovative sound design. There are moments where conversations between the principal actors are completely drowned out by ship horns and other dockyard noises, indicating the oppressive acoustic environment of the industrial waterfront area. But when the male lead, played by Marlon Brando, talks about the country, which might seem a welcome relief from the noise and dirt of the city, he rejects it, saying 'I don't like the country, the crickets make me nervous'. In the country, the crickets are a constant acoustic presence at certain times of day, just as machine sounds are in the city. But to Brando, the machine sounds are familiar, yet the cricket sounds are unfamiliar and potentially threatening.

I remember my own experience when I first arrived in Grenada, West Indies, and was living in a rural area. The soundscape was totally unfamiliar, and when I attempted to go out for a night-time walk shortly after arriving, the sound of tree frogs was so loud and close that I almost couldn't move. Although I love different soundscapes, and am normally drawn to unusual and evocative sounds such as these, in this case unfamiliarity bred fear. It took me several days to begin to feel comfortable. My son had a similar reaction to the sound of surf when he first arrived in Grenada: it was an unfamiliar sound for him since he had grown up inland. And as Westerkamp relates, when she went with a group of artists to the Zone of Silence in Mexico, where she did the original recordings for *Cricket Voice*, initially they experienced it as an alien and hostile environment. Of the listener response group, Cooil (30m, Queen's electroacoustic music class) articulates this feeling of fear associated with unfamiliar sounds most clearly in his writing:

> The title along with the sounds really take me back to my tree planting days, trying to fall asleep at night and getting a little freaked out, trying to come up with rational explanations for all the different sounds outside the tent walls.

Now, it could be argued that cricket sounds are fairly common in the city. I heard some quite clearly one August evening, while walking in downtown Toronto. My strongest memory involving crickets is of walking by a vacant lot next to a major highway with my parents the evening after I arrived in Canada. The cricket sounds

my pre-conceived questions, respondents open up new areas of thinking for me. This paper is based on fifty-one listener responses to *Cricket Voice*.

[4]Participants chose their own pseudonyms.

were very loud: I had never heard a sound like it in England. Yet cricket sounds in the city are still framed by traffic and other familiar machine sounds. In the country they are more naked. And when Westerkamp works with the sound of a single cricket in a still desert night, this is the cricket sound at its most naked. Then when she slows down the sound, bringing its pitch lower, she evokes the image of what is for some an unbearable intimacy with the cricket, in which it is enlarged and deepened, seeming to emanate from a much larger organism, and perhaps humans can feel relatively diminished in comparison, therefore more vulnerable. In film sound, this is called 'sound scale': as Rick Altman defines it: 'the apparent size attributed to characters and objects by the characteristics of the sounds they make' (Altman 1992: 252). Westerkamp is enlarging the scale of the cricket, and its proximity to the listener, through her work with slowing and amplifying its sound. The cricket is huge, and very close.

Although one listener refers to older science fiction movies, I would argue that it is in recent science fiction films that giant insects have become the most terrifying hostile alien, the greatest threat to people. While the horror of a human genetic mixing with insects is explored in Cronenberg's *The Fly*, I am thinking more particularly of the *Alien* series.[5]

The original movie in the series, named simply *Alien*, has been described as one of the most terrifying science fiction movies ever made, more horror than space fiction.[6] In the *Alien* series, the female lead character (Ellen Ripley), played by Sigourney Weaver, comes into contact with an intelligent alien species which is insect-like, with various physical aspects of spiders, crickets and cockroaches, at larger than human scale and with a human-like cranium. In each of the films, Ripley/Weaver uses technology to defeat the alien, in two cases blowing the creature out of an airlock, in another case strapping herself into a full-body forklift with mechanical arms and legs that become extensions of her own, giving her the strength to match the insect. These films also explore the dark sides of pregnancy and inter-species intimacy. The alien impregnates humans, who then give birth through the stomach wall, dying horribly in the process.

When the Ripley/Weaver character herself becomes pregnant, the creature does not harm her, but comes unbearably close, sniffing her scent. This scene is a marker in the developing relationship between the monster and Ripley, in which danger and intimacy are in constant play. Her desire for knowledge of the alien, for a relationship with it, is to better arm herself in order to destroy it.

In its exploration of inter-species intimacy and monstrosity, the film associates the alien monster with a natural world that is threatened by corporate capitalism. Thomas Byers describes the monster in Alien as representing Nature:

> The creature is, in fact, an embodiment of nature as perceived by corporate capitalism, and by an evolutionary science whose emphasis on competition is a manifestation of capitalist ideology. (Byers 1990: 40)

I believe that the *Alien* series may be a contemporary depiction of urban dwellers' alienation from unfamiliar wilderness environments, the country (unfamiliar place) where the crickets (alien creatures) can make us nervous (lost, trapped, threatened). The generic Alien, depicted as a giant insect, is the latest manifestation of human (plus technology) against nature (out of control). The characters of the movie depict various attitudes towards the creature. The corporate scientists in the films wish to domesticate it, to control and funnel its powers, to enslave it. They do not recognise its power to destroy, and do not treat it with respect. Ripley knows it, respects it, but cannot let it live. Ultimately, although the films flirt with intimacy, the relationship developed is all about conflict. This is quite different from Westerkamp's relationship with the cricket, where she wishes to enlarge and deepen the cricket sounds, metaphorically bringing herself closer to a larger insect, *without* obliterating the cricket in the process.

Science fiction is a popular genre, and the *Alien* series is an immensely successful example. In each film, the threat to humanity is an alien which appears as a giant insect. In each case, humanity is saved by technology. And interestingly, in each case technology is wielded by a woman: in the *Alien* series, Ellen Ripley's role has been described as one of the most interesting and strongest roles ever created for a woman in Hollywood (Byers 1990: 39).

The original *Alien* film also has a very interesting soundtrack, in which the sounds of insects are used to index anxiety in the main character, and bodily sounds (both human and alien) are used to indicate danger. In the film, when the crew first investigates the alien ship, and has found some giant eggs, several parallels to Westerkamp's piece emerge. First we hear the wind (as in

[5]Also some programmes in the television series *Star Trek: Voyager*, although I tend to believe that these are themselves inspired by the *Alien* series. In the *Star Trek: Voyager* series, the greatest threat to humanity for a long time was the Borg, a cyborg race who range through the universe taking others' technology and assimilating them to serve the collective. In the 1997–8 season, the Borg were themselves devastated by a far greater threat: amphibian insects resembling giant crickets, who have no compassion: when a character establishes telepathic contact with them, they only say 'the weak will perish'. Once again, it is through technology that the crew members survive: they learn how to adapt a Borg nanoprobe to repel the aliens. In the 1998–9 season, the Voyager crew meets this amphibian species again, they spy on each other, and through spying learn that they had more in common than they realise, finally establishing a truce.

[6]Ridley Scott's surprising, smoke-filled scare fest is the Old Dark House of space movies – more horror than sci-fi, really'. Reviewed by Eddie Cockrell, <http://www.nitrateonline.com/ralien.html>, posted November 26, 1997. 'Chilling, tense, and perhaps the scariest movie ever made! Ripley (Weaver) is back to do battle with the creepiest, most realistic extraterrestrial life to ever menace a space crew!' <http://www.cybertown.net/fun/products/d8117.html>, accessed 21 October 1998.

Westerkamp's piece). In the *Alien* film, the wind is used to indicate the hostile environment of the planet, and is heard each time we see the planet surface. The exploring crewman's monologue makes an explicit connection with a hot exotic environment, saying 'it's like the goddamn tropics in here'. A held note in the musical track heightens suspense. The crew member's breathing is amplified in his space suit, giving the audience member the illusion that she is right next to the crew member, sharing his experience intimately, so close that she can hear his breathing, and feel his anxiety. In the background are high-pitched rhythmic clicking sounds. These sounds are used in the film throughout the sequence where the crew members find the alien eggs. Later, these sounds emerge again each time we see the main character (Weaver/Ripley) wrestle with the decision to let the crew members back into the ship.

A little later in the film, there is a birth sequence, beginning as the crew eat a meal together, and the crew member who was heard earlier in the cave-exploration scene, and was subsequently attacked, gives birth to an alien through his stomach wall. Here, a heartbeat is used to heighten anxiety in the audience, and intimate squishy wet bodily sounds are employed to make the alien seem both very close and too intimate. From this point on, the alien is consistently associated with intimate bodily sounds and wet sounds in general: when the alien kills a crew member later on, sounds of dripping water are juxtaposed with chains swinging, and the crewman lifts his face to feel the water drip onto it, just before the alien interrupts this intimate moment to attack and kill him.

Several sounds in the *Alien* soundtrack are quite similar to those used by Westerkamp in *Cricket Voice*, although with very different intent. Westerkamp uses the sound of the wind and of a cricket, simulates a heartbeat, and plays with these sounds using amplification and slowing them down to bring them closer to the listener. Her intent in doing this is to establish an intimate connection between listener and cricket. In the *Alien* film, many similar sounds are used, and amplification is employed to create intimacy, but this time with the intention of heightening drama and suspense, to make the audience more afraid of the monstrous alien.

The first film in the *Alien* series was released in 1979. Of my respondents, only two of the fourteen listeners who were over twenty-five years of age had a response that I would relate directly to horror or science fiction encounters, although several mentioned some feeling of disturbance. Most of the horror or science fiction responses came from younger listeners, who would likely have been more affected by these science fiction films which are aimed at a young audience. Respondents under twenty-five have also grown up with science fiction television series such as the *X-Files*, programmes which use sound design balanced evenly with music in a similar way to that of the original *Alien* soundtrack, so that recorded environmental sounds are more foregrounded in the sound mix than in most television programmes. Rob Watson (22m, Queen's University electroacoustic music) says that *Cricket Voice* reminds him of the *X-Files* 'or a major network television programme investigating an alien in area 51, the New Mexican desert. Mysterious, foreboding, terrifying, beat with a sense of driving curiosity'. My following journal entry describes how sound design is used in this type of television programme to establish a suspenseful mood:

> October 27, 1998. Tuesday, 10 p.m. Space Channel. A programme begins without credits. It is night-time, a farmer's field. Establishing soundtrack: crickets, accompanied by a synthesised pulsing wash, a narrow noise-band. The sounds are fairly evenly balanced with regard to amplitude, neither music nor sound effect dominates. Text appears on the lower left corner of the screen, giving the date and location. There is a feeling of expectation. The sound of digging, close-up of a shovel, and there – a dead body. It is the *X-Files*.

Unfamiliar sounds often cause an anxious, alienated response as people feel threatened by what they do not understand. This is reflected in the Brando quote that I referred to earlier: the unfamiliar sound environment of the country can make the urban listener nervous. Recent science fiction programming in film and on television uses sound design to play on this anxiety to create drama in a production. Although Westerkamp intended listeners to hear an intimate encounter with a cricket that would bring them closer to this alien species despite their anxieties, some listeners experience this encounter in her piece as uncomfortably close, an anxiety that I believe has been maintained and extended by the use of sound to underscore drama in contemporary science fiction soundtracks.

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APPENDIX

Cricket Voice Sound Structure. Tape Piece (10:55)

Its primary sound source is the night song of a single cricket, recorded close-up. The first two minutes of the piece are composed almost entirely of sounds derived from this source, accompanied only by the sound of wind (unprocessed), which is the first sound heard. During this initial section, the cricket sound is slowed down by various amounts to create several pitches. This section is characterised by high vertical density, as a result of the various pitches being heard simultaneously, as well as rhythmic complexity as the sound files at various tape speeds, layered upon one another, produce repetition of the original rhythm of the cricket sound stretched to different lengths, creating a sensation of polyrhythmic cycles. At 00:49, the original cricket sound is introduced, immediately perceived by its difference of timbre and tempo from the slowed-down versions.

At 1:48, a voice-like sound which was created by processing a slowed-down cricket sound to emphasise and harmonise the pitch, is introduced. This sound stands out because of its timbral difference and less rhythmic character. Another timbral difference is perceived at 1:52, when the sounds of whipping are introduced (branches moved through the air like whips). This sound is characterised by its rhythmic regularity, in contrast to the more irregular processed cricket sounds. At the same time, the slowed-down cricket sounds fade slightly, receding to the background of the piece. Shortly thereafter, at 2:29, sped up percussive sounds made from knocking on the leaves of a palm tree are introduced. At 2:40, a loop from the same source is introduced. These sounds are related to the whipping sounds in that the strong beat of each rhythm is at a similar rate (around sixty beats per minute), but their timbral difference provides contrast. The loop is panned constantly from its introduction to the end of the section, a period of almost three minutes, creating a sense of constant, restless movement over the slow voice and slowed cricket sounds. The period from 1:48 to 5:20 is characterised by increased timbral diversity, and decreased rhythmic complexity with increased contrast in tempo.

At 5:21, the sound of Westerkamp knocking on the Maguey cactus is introduced. This irregular, fast rhythm with quick, close pitch changes has an intimate quality. The focus on pitch is intensified at 6:00 with the introduction of a loop of a particularly melodic section which rises and falls, playing the Nopal cactus leaves and spikes. Perhaps the most significant change in this section is that although the cricket sound continues throughout, the slowed-down cricket sound (which Westerkamp identifies as a heartbeat) is not present at all. For that reason, the perceived tempo of this section is faster than anywhere else.

At 6:44, the slowed-down cricket sound returns, shifting perceptual focus to its rhythm. Shortly after this, at around 7:00, a very low frequency sound is perceived (Westerkamp notes in the score that she introduces this at 6:23, but I did not hear it until around 7:00), which shifts focus to the pitch range, which at this point is very wide, from the very low frequency sound just mentioned to the high unprocessed cricket sounds. This wide pitch range is to be present until the end of the piece, giving a sensation of opening out into a large space. This sense of opening out is accentuated by the slow tempo of timbral change in the low frequency drone and slowed-down cricket sounds, creating a sensation of suspended time. In this section, the percussive cactus sounds associated with the previous part are still present, but recede into the background as they decrease in amplitude.

At 8:46, the sounds of clapping and stomping are introduced. Again, this sound attracts attention because of several differences: the percussive and fairly regular claps have the resonance of a large enclosed space (they were recorded in an abandoned water reservoir), and are accompanied by vocal sounds that are the first sounds that could clearly be identified as human voices. This sound is foregrounded until around 10:00, when it is gradually faded out. The low frequency drone continues, and at 9:46, the sound of playing on palm tree leaves reappears briefly. The unaltered cricket sound is fairly constant through this section, disappearing for a few seconds at a time, then reappearing. For the last ten seconds of the piece, all other sounds except the cricket have faded out: as Westerkamp says, 'the cricket has the last word'.