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Posthuman Performances: Giving Attention to Machine Songs in Public Places

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Abstract

In this article, droning sounds produced from electrical machines are considered as posthuman performances. In viewing machines as non-human agents, they are understood to influence the aural architecture of public places. Despite the fact that continuous hums are typically zoned-out from human listening, these sounds impact our psychological landscapes and the formation of space. A methodology of field recording machines proximately is proposed here, to consider the importance of machine noises in the formation of atmosphere and sociality in public spaces. When a machine is recorded closely, and the microphone moved around it, intricacies of the machine's standing waves can be uncovered. Through this recording practice, the human becomes with the non-human. This act of field recording machines highlights our entangled living with multiple agents and allows the unheard or underheard to be focused on.

Four sound recordings of machines found in public spaces are presented, alongside their location on an interactive world map. This sonic and visual combination encourages the reader to speculate about those sites and similar ones from their experience. Topics of non-places, noise infiltration into green spaces, mobility through places, and hidden purposes of machines are discussed relative to the four recordings. The sites recorded – gas stations, parks, escalators, and supermarkets – are important landmarks of contemporary life. By considering how machine noises contribute to a sites' aural architecture, a better understanding of human cohabitation with non-humans may be elucidated.

Keywords: posthuman performativity, field recording, non-human agency, machine noise, aural architecture

The sonic backdrop of both urban and rural spaces increasingly fills with noise as machinic technologies proliferate (Schafer 1977). Despite forming an underpinning noise floor, the intricate sonic patterns emanating from machines often go unnoticed. Rich harmonies and mesmerizing rhythms are created by air vents, electrical units, utility boxes, and other machines. These contraptions scatter much of our contemporary landscape from urban to rural; however, they are little observed, subconsciously zoned out as background static or passed by fleetingly while in transit. Despite the many people moving past them, the machine's posthuman performances are little noticed, as our ears are extremely good at removing consistent masking sounds to focus on intentional ones (Tomlinson 2019, 20). Though their moving parts are often hidden behind walls or within boxes, their sonorities subconsciously impinge upon human's daily lives. But when they are investigated in proximity, their rhythms and pitches appear hauntingly beautiful.

Over the course of many years I have recorded machine audio found in public spaces: shopping malls, alleyways, motorway bridges, airports, courtyards, gas stations, and other commonly accessible sites. By bringing my microphones close to the machines, intricate sonic layers emerge, otherwise unappreciable from a distance. Different perspectives of a machine's standing waves come into audibility when I pass the microphone slowly across the objects' metal gratings. The recordings contained here present some of these machine songs, accompanied by my written reflections of the sites they were found in.

Because the machines were created for functional purposes, their sonic outputs are entirely by-products. The sounds operate on their own – continuously whirring away with purpose. When observing them removed from their functional context, their purpose is hidden or unknown. Their droning machinic songs are performances themselves. The human is "located within a constant flux of material flows that enable uncertain becomings with (and within) a lively and agential more-than human world" (Marchand 2018, 293).

Beginning with this idea, the machines should not be ignored but rather considered important actants. The machines have agency, not in the sense of a subject/object dualism but as "'doing'/'being' in its intra-activity" (Barad 2003, 827). How do these posthuman performances entangle with their surrounding locational spaces and human passersby? The sounds emanating from machines occupy heard space, influencing a place's atmosphere and its psychologically perceptible landscape. As "space is partially given definition by the acoustical presence of environmental sounds" (LaBelle 2015, 149), then machine drones, through their reflections, dissipation, refractions, and other acoustic phenomena, delineate spatial distances and boundaries; resultantly influencing a space's psychogeography (Debord 1955). Aural architecture, the identification and valuation of a space by the observance and experience of the sounds in it (Blesser and Salter 2009), provides a useful tool for relating human perception to the static architecture of spaces. Accounting for felt qualities in a space brings us closer to understanding our life practices and experiences in those spaces, encouraging us to better coexist with the non-human world around us. With nature and culture intrinsically linked and contingent upon one another (Moore 2017), respecting posthuman performances in the surrounding non-human world will allow for increased mutual becomings with them. Although multiple approaches to aural architecture are available, here, I focus specifically on machinic drones. By bringing these non-human machines into our attentive listening sphere, we may better consider humans as entangled within a larger meshwork (Ingold 2010).

In this project, field recordings focus attention onto a machine's given actions within public spaces. The recordings are hosted on an interactive world sound map, radio aporee, to concretise them in relation to the locations they were recorded at. Although the map does not represent the precise weather conditions, time of day, or amount of activity when the recordings were made, it does show the architectural surroundings and indicate each space's sociability. However, their presentation online does not fully articulate the entire network these sounds existed in – this would require multiple sensorial accounts over a longer time period. Rather, their virtual presentation encourages the audience to speculate on the aural architecture of similar public spaces, perhaps associating these recordings to

locations encountered on their own, at other times. Via this abstraction, potential interweaving between humans and material landscapes can be imagined.

Cairney Hill Gas Station Vent

Recording link: https://aporee.org/maps/?loc=48911&m=satellite

This recording was made by the side of a shut gas station in a small rural village in Scotland. This unit not being in pristine shape, the semi-clogged fan catches and clunks in interesting ways.

Gas stations are motorway landmarks. They are places intended to be passed through briefly; transitory zones emblematic of what Marc Augé refers to as non-places (Augé 2008). These are "spaces of circulation, consumption, and communication" (Augé 2008, VIII), spaces that Zigmunt Bauman suggests contemporary society increasingly interacts with (Bauman 2000). Non-places are in-between destinations; the locations we inhabit while attempting to travel large spatial distances. With transit accelerated in supermodernity, a superabundance of space appears available for traversing (Augé 2008). To cover these distances, we increasingly occupy spaces of travel and connection points between. Interims are frequently spent at gas stations, and the atmosphere experienced at them well worth considering. What audible features contribute to the felt aura surrounding non-places, and more specifically, a journey's pause at a gas station?

Despite extensive time spent in non-places, the buzzing electrical units found in them are often encountered briefly and quickly overlooked. In the case of a gas station, the machine's noise blends with that of passing traffic; its beautiful song subsumed into the continuous noise of the motorway environment. This recording, taken late in the evening to decrease traffic's sonic interference, captures the amazing sounds of a machine in the gas station non-place.

Technology Building Machine

Recording link: https://aporee.org/maps/?loc=38527&m=satellite

Recorded at the side of the technology building at The University of Huddersfield, this electrical unit's rich noise is audible from a small footpath along a canal lower down. The noise from units such as these frequently flood outward onto park and nature areas, adding white noise to otherwise visually tranquil areas. The incursion of noise into green areas is said to irritate some people more than others (Aletta, Van Renterghem, and Botteldooren 2018), but noise in communities poses a major health problem (World Health Organization 1999). The WHO has identified noise to cause hearing impairment, interfere with spoken communication, disturb sleep, cause cardiovascular and physiological diseases, accelerate latent mental disorders, and otherwise interfere with intentional activities (World Health Organization 1999). These studies indicate the entanglement between humans and machine noise is one of discord, however, when sonic point sources infringe upon expansive spaces, they delineate distance and depth. Insofar as space is partially constructed by sounds, a person moving through a park constructs distance and motion by hearing sound markers such as these. Co-occupying location alongside a continuous noise will impact negatively upon ones' health, but other understandings of movement and dimension may be possible through acknowledging machine drones.

From a distance, the hum of this unit sounds inconsequential, but when listened to closely and carefully a myriad of patterns emerge. What possible posthuman becomings can be made as our green spaces coexist beside industrial sonic exhaust? Will machine noise only impinge negatively on our health or could it serve as an earmark for perceiving movement and location?

Escalator Squeaks

Recording link: https://aporee.org/maps/?loc=47722&m=satellite

This is a recording of an escalator that connects a street level sidewalk to an elevated tram stop in The Hague, Netherlands. The squeaking of this poorly oiled machine forms a counterpoint to its cyclical whir. At a certain moment, the escalator changes velocity, triggered by a sensor detecting motion. This brief spurt of energy subsides shortly, returning to a slower state of squeaking activity. The cyclical continuous sound of

escalators such as this one augment many of the transitory non-places we pass through. Their purpose – to move us through – could be considered in tandem with their sonic characteristics to better understand many of the non-places which make up our contemporary world.

Escalators are standard units for moving large masses of people, their existence having shaped the metropolises of our contemporary world and cultural practices of its people (Goetz 2003). They permeate modern cityscapes, "the transportation equivalent of air-conditioning, the background hum of urban life" (King 2003, 79). They do indeed hum, but this sonic imprint is subordinate to their functional purpose to mobilize human bodies. Although an escalator's function is blatant, what sonic atmosphere does their machinery create? How do escalator's sounds construct the aural architecture of the multistory landscapes we move through?

Supermarket Ventilation

Recording link: https://aporee.org/maps/?loc=47723&m=satellite

In this recording taken near the exterior of a supermarket in The Hague, the fluttering plastic slits of a ventilation shaft intermingles with the continuous white noise of its air expulsion. Air conditioning and heating units contribute to two soundscapes simultaneously: a building's interior and exterior. The sounds of freezer and refrigerator fans merge with cash register beeps and muzak inside supermarkets – a lively and dense atmosphere – while on the exterior, exhaust vents sound starkly plainer.

Areas to the rear of buildings are often overlooked or passed by briefly. Parking lots behind superstores and side streets beside skyscrapers are filled with machines augmenting a building's interior, yet their songs are little heeded. This recording was made late at night when the supermarket was closed. The freezers and fridges continue forming a soundscape well after close, yet unheard deeper down the shafts from this vent.

Conclusion

As machine noises permeate public spaces of transitory passage, they influence atmosphere and aural architecture. In paying attention to their sonic biproducts, a better understanding of human and non-human coexistence can be formulated. Here I have demonstrated how machines are themselves performers, validating them as actant non-human agents. The close-mike recordings that I presented here use explorative microphone movement to reveal the many layers of a machine's multiple standing waves. By field recording machines in this way, we can both acknowledge and work-with our mechanic cohabitants. It is a practice-based approach for us to better "*become with* many" (Haraway 2008, 4). These recordings allow for speculation on how machine sounds influence social and experiential accounts of similar spaces. Future research could consider the aural architecture of other locations by applying a similar field recording methodology. Other non-human entities, such as animals or acoustic resonances, could be proximately recorded. Of course, detailed close-mike recordings such as these could be made alongside other perspectives on a space. Recordings that focus on up-close sound could work alongside an overarching sound image, for instance an ambisonic recording. Recordings could be combined with other documentation formats, such as written accounts, videos, photographs and so forth, to add a visual or linguistic account of a space's aural architecture. These approaches could map an area's aural architecture as distributed, and draw attention to distance and multiplicity. This project, on the other hand, aims to present the richness of specific machines, to isolate their noise from other sounds in the area. In doing so, the recordings focus attention to the machines exclusively, to observe the beauty of their posthuman performances.

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About the Author

Originally from Ottawa (CAN), Colin Frank experiments with sound, electronics, theatre, installation art, and percussion; investigating excess, bodily extremes, barely controllable instruments, and rich raw noises. His PhD research at the University of Huddersfield (UK) considers unconventional instruments and objects as active agents in the creative process. His duo Brutalust explores intermedia performance to engage audiences in novel ways, and his group the Drift Ensemble mixes experimental improvisation with contemporary composition. Active on international stages, he has most notably performed in the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (UK), Berlin's CTM festival (DE), the Darmstadt Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik (DE),

Electric Springs (UK), Beast Feast (UK), SoundThought (UK), PAS Quebec Days (CAN), and the Oorsprong curators series (NL). His instrumental compositions have been presented by the Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble (RU), TAK Ensemble (US), AndPlay duo (US), Red Note Ensemble (UK), and many solo collaborators. Recently, in the *Mixed Currents* project, violin performance, virtuosity, and beauty were explored in a collaborative environment. In his installation works, audiences are encouraged to interact with common objects, and his concern about plastic waste has prompted critical commentary on consumptive habits.

Colin received a double-degree B.Mus in composition and performance from McGill University. He studied sound at the Institute of Sonology (NL), composition at the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik and SoundSCAPE (IT), and performance at Nief-Norf Summer Festival (US) and SICPP (US). He has taught improvisation at the Waterloo Region Contemporary Music Festival (CAN) and at Huddersfield University.