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Synthesized Environments of Utmost Clarity
by Mikhail Pozdniakov

When I was a teenager I used to sit in an empty field listening for hours to the sounds of distant cars, railroads, helicopters, and other motorized objects. These sounds, which are very rough and noisy when they are near, attracted me from the distance because they had merged and diffused into a continuum when they reached my ears. By this experience it came to my mind that it is more satisfying for me to listen to continuous changes within one sound than to the combinations of discreet sonic events usually found in music. Remembering that a few years ago, I began to search for possibilities to create continuous sonic situations with controlled dramatic development that cannot be expressed in traditional terms of melody, harmony, and sound color. The five pieces collected on this compact disc are my first results.

Wieland Samolak, *Steady State Music*

*Axiom*: How buildings and cities sound—this is unrecyclable.

*Thesis*: To learn to listen to these environments, one has to learn to listen to music first, for its non-musical qualities.

A large part of the production of film in our contemporary moment is involved in the synthesis of environments, like: the construction of sets to be enframed by the camera, and the superimposition and layering of sounds into what becomes either immediately perceivable as a soundtrack or conversation, or nearly non-present, as environmental noise, like the passing of cars and the hum of ventilators. What should be noticed is that the unique soundstage of each film substantializes its atmosphere. A completely silent section in film is rare and, today, is used as a means of emphasis. But it is not the case, looking back, that during the silent film era a soundtrack à la John Cage’s *4’33”* or piano playing in the background filled the void. The soundstage is virtual, and the viewer tends to fill in most of the required sounds by gazing at the movements on screen. A shot showing shuffling feet, or an opening door, or laughter is suggestive enough that all the

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ostensive narrative gaps of the purely visual medium are quickly ignored, so that silence is one of the means, implicit as it may be, immuring one into the moment.

In fact, in sound engineering and production, it is known that a soundstage, even at a concert hall, is a virtual soundstage. The task was how and where to place objects in a stereo field in order to give them their proper space, their correct sonic texture. This was a concern already for the Greeks and their amphitheatre, which was built specifically so that speech delivered on stage could touch gently and precisely the ears of all those attending. The delivery and clarity of sound announces clairvoyant quality, a structural relationship of prediction, in that how and where one should properly receive the sonic event is set into the building’s form. In the orchestra or band, the placement of players provides a secondary aestheticization of musical arrangement, alloying harmonic strata to locations on stage. As the musicians play, they seem to stage the drama of purely geometric interactions of sound. The modern construction of concert halls for the purpose of projecting of acoustic music to the audience can be seen in the selection of materials. The combination of concrete, steel, and wood is not only inexpensive—displaying a dignified, restrained appearance at that—but is also fortunate because the resonant qualities of these materials coincidentally correspond to the range of hearing of the human ear. The varied proportion and positioning of this material arraigns and anoints the atmosphere of such places. Incidentally, this is why good sound is so difficult to achieve in outdoor concerts or in clubs—only a technically adept and highly skilled engineer can accommodate a given and usually awful set of conditions to shape for clarity the sonic cushion in which one can easily listen or dance. Some contemporary performance art installations in electroacoustic music accommodate an awareness of the structural elements above into their work. A now-classical example is the Acousmonium of François Bayle of the Institut national de l’audiovisuel - Groupe de recherches musicales (INA-GRM), which modifies the traditional concert stage by setting loudspeakers into the place of players. “Chamber music” is, in this way, taken literally to mean music shaped by a given chamber, made for-and-with that chamber as its instrument. Thus, the type and timbre of sound have been intimated along with the environs. The concert hall to this day stratifies the relationship between the source of sound and its listeners into distinct terraces: stage and audience. Any organized, structured attempt to immerse one in the moment of sound by the dispersion of its sources around one synthesizes an environment of listening. Such an environment becomes inseparable from its physical construction.

Church liturgy, both East and West, is a largely sonic set of rituals. How the hymn or the intonation of the bible reaches the assembled asserts the materials of construction: simple stone carries sound enormously; the reverberations are thick, long; and the composition of plainchant and sacred music took this attribute
into account. Old buildings like castles and cathedrals nearly constantly murmur; the smallest sound is amplified and reverberated into unintelligibility, floating among the rafters. By contrast, the cities of today are made of buildings that hum, the unceasing resonance of air conditioning and electronics assuring one of being in a properly maintained private space. A din of music, construction, and traffic animates the outside so that, in effect, the silence of our buildings is that resonant and steady drone set against the outdoor swarm of noise. Perhaps this is why many stay inside, apart from understood reasons (like work, play, sex). Where the din in rural locations is uplifted, resonating into the open air, consequently making a much more open space sonically-speaking, in urban areas the constant refraction and reverberation by flat-fronted buildings sitting together, facing each other, results in a much more condensed echo-space. The weight and mass of the acoustic environs forces the silence of the rural to retreat inside and appear as the drone or the pulsation. This is the shift of the pastoral into the interior zone of industrialization. The primordial moment becomes not nature, but production. The human is uprooted and ungrounded, and the soil holds no purchase. “The plank has no solidity of substance. To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies. Shall I not slip through?”—so writes Arthur Stanley Eddington, a physicist (Benjamin 142).

To return to film, one thing it stages with frequency, and in fact this could be considered a condition of staging, is the presentation of the sounds local to places distantly removed, whether contemporary to our moment but unlikely to be visited, or from a time long-past. No doubt these are staged utopias; no doubt the sounds are never quite true-to-life. One thing that impresses itself through such distance, through staging, is the historical dimension—i.e., the fleeting quality of sonic events. Every sound is a lament towards its approaching demise. Our current imaginary is, as of yet, unable to register the passing. Acoustic, aural space is “boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion” (McLuhan, Medium 48)—as if there is no end to sound, the constant billowing cushion . . . The hushed mutism of an expectant crowd or audience taken in by performance or film is a quotation of pastoral scenery; enacted in that moment is the peaceful, extensive, rolling landscape. Likewise, an exact silence impresses itself on the spectators of dreams and paintings, giving the latter their alluring air, as a pause marked by speechless viewing. And yet pure silence is unintelligible to us—every attempt at shaping an environment for sound is an attempt to render pure silence in conceptual terms. An isolation tank firstly synchronizes one not to the void but to the biorhythms of pulse and blood flow, breathing, the whispers of moving flesh and hair. Perhaps what film is able to do for us is to precisely isolate the virtual features of sound linked to event and set them into rupture; those contours of difference suggest and birth distance, a “staged silence.” Perhaps the point is not the creation of sound environments but our ever-distant presence to them, a distance constantly made to bear through rapt attention, a
distance which is named silence. Film, then, sets us into the silent zone of the biorhythm, that first and most intimate unintelligible noise facing the brunt of history. Because the synthesized environment, the virtual soundstage and its crafting, is the most abstract, and each sound we pick out is radiantly alien, lost amongst its cousins and kin. The effect of such manipulations and emplotted tensions arranging space for sound is the contortion of the real environment, the natural-artificial environment of the city. That torsion forces a break, and the soundscape of the city is no longer tended to place and name. The soundscape is uplifted, made to appear stark and abstract—a music of finitude. Its re-synthesis through the work of staging, in something like film, explicates this relationship, and suggests its capture in recording—the price being that any true sonic particularity is no longer tenable.

Clarity, the capacity to pick out a certain sound, or a certain field of sounds, is in the synthesized environment the first notation of sonic manipulation. If we can imagine an invisible hand directing the sound of a given (nominally real) place, we have somewhat approached the level of alienated abstraction needed to listen to non-music. The paranoid gesture setting a master-manipulator over a given set or series of events is what animates listening to any composed piece of music, not only in the idea that every element was precisely placed and arranged, but also that it was meant to be heard, admired, judged. Once we are thrown out of the subjection to a piece of music, for instance if we hate it, then we have recuperated the elementary experience of listening to non-music, anything that does not bear the mark of composition. Because the ignorance, or a generalized indifference, is already a deeply mature situation to experience. To be able to pass biorhythm or noise into silence is the mark of maturity and the coming-of-age, both philosophically and phenomenologically. This is what marks a citizen of a given polis, what sets a person into their time and era. To hear again what is unheard, willingly, with pleasure, is to shift from being a citizen of the time into self-consciousness.

One of the very popular musics of the contemporary age is the genre of ‘field recordings.’ Their production is widespread, but few listen to them actively as a genre of choice. Even when they are produced for use, in film, yoga classes, or as soothing background noise in other more popular music, these sounds outstrip the capacity of the consumer to listen to them, or indeed even to register them as present or as music. In categorizations of shops and discographies these works are commonly labelled “non-music” and then put alongside other records. This is in no sense to call the production and listening of these pieces subversive, as if they are some species of a masterfully obscure beauty. The generative moment of enthusiasm in listening to this genre is not its finally becoming an accepted music but its becoming at all, which is in the listening that marks it as such. There is a slight absurdity in placing field recordings, the sound of passing cars, the chirping of birds, the buzz of conversation,
as a genre of music alongside the tradition of Western Art music, for instance. But it must be emphasized that the recording techniques serving as the basis for the genre match the premise of the vertical and horizontal shaping of traditional compositions.

Sounds hold a fascination for their recorder. Recording specifically is about calibrating the equipment to match the intensity and duration of a given sound. Paradoxically, if you try to record a tiny sound by using a highly sensitive device the effect usually follows in a twofold manner: gross distortion of its characteristics to our ear by the necessary increase of volume to make it clearly present, or its complete obliteration against a field of other sounds. With most recordings, a tiny sound will become the modification of others, and will vanish into the sonic ether as a quality of the overall texture. And so, the size of sounds determines their clarity. The smallest sounds become qualities of others, perhaps harmonic or enharmonic, perhaps only effecting a slight change to the overall field. The largest take up the entire field of listening and, unless one knows to withdraw, cannot be heard either (if one pauses to listen, most places are outrageously loud). Preparative listening—attempting to hear every detail and nuance, to register every tick and boom—is the exact correlate of the paranoiac supposition of a guiding master. Opposed to the composer-master, at the end of the other polarity, a figure is suggested as being ready to receive all, to supplicate to the event and its passing. Listening marks a twofold distanciation: the rupture of any sonic event from its home and its replacement and return by synthesis. Inhabiting city space or any other sonic zone marks this dyad of construction and reception.

A brief word on instruments and instrumentality, those like radio telescopes, spectrometers, or oscilloscopes. These, of course, function as extensions of the senses. But, they are no longer rudimentary, in that they are not built for integration into our sensorium, like the hearing aid and the telescope. The latter two devices are examples of a sense-extension still immanently intelligible. The dream embodied by the former devices is something like the total integration of circuitry into the nervous system, although not in the intimate, metaphoric way Marshall McLuhan imagined. McLuhan suggested by his work with media that every new technology enters human history by the banishment of its abstraction into the immanence of sense. That is, we cannot understand technology if we think of it as “tool,” something that stands in addition to the body. In the epigraph introducing The Gutenberg Galaxy, McLuhan writes,

There might have been some advantage in substituting for the word ‘galaxy’ the word ‘environment’. Any technology tends to create a new human environment. Script and papyrus created the social environment we think of in connection with the empires of the ancient world. Technological environments are not merely passive containers of people but are active processes that reshape people and other technologies alike. In our

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time the sudden shift from the mechanical technology of the wheel to the technology of electric circuitry represents one of the major shifts of all historical time. (1)

A snapshot by a camera enframes some passage of time and light and strangely stops its passing—thus rendering the electro-chemical phenomenology of the segmented, technologically mediated subject. (A microphone, therefore, can be thought of as taking a picture of a sound.) McLuhan imagines an embodied and historically immanent relationship, taken as the analogy of the relation of the body to the mind, the concept to its bearing, the message to its medium, “a ratio between the mind and things made by the shaping imagination,” the latter being the effect of the synaesthesia or interplay of functions carried out by users and media (268). He thus compels us to come to the realization that handling an old or ancient technological implement is the re-living of the tensions of its original creation. One is then perfectly subject to history, able to receive and re-experience, describe, potentially all of its nuances. There is no question of loss, or of unreclyclability, of a pure relationship to waste.

What truth is there in these devices, which show impossible, inhuman data? As it was once written, “Squids? Crawly things with arms? . . . Superconducting quantum interference detectors. Used them in the war to find submarines, suss out enemy cyber systems . . . Even the primitive models could measure a magnetic field a billionth the strength of geomagnetic force; it’s like pulling a whisper out of a cheering stadium” (Gibson 23). So our sensorium corresponds to a kind of horizon. The only way to move out of this limit is through the metaphysical experience of abstraction, the reduction of things to data. This is precisely an operation steeped in the dimension of history, memory, and time, more generally. Reconstruction, telescopy, genealogy—these are about linear systems of amplification, which set one’s position as an abstract marker on a very long continuum. They are accepted because they are familiar, not because they are any more human, more traditional, or any less abstract. All the data coming from outside our narrow spectrum, given to us by instruments, is non-subjective and incomprehensible to phenomenology. It is inhuman. It requires us to step out of ourselves to comprehend it. The latter requirement was once called ecstasy by the mystics.

The correlate of ecstasy (ekstasis in the Greek) is entasis, or “standing-within-oneself.” Perspectivity as such is a very cruel experience—the world pressing in on the self and the self pressing back. Such an image has informed much analysis, but it is strictly wrong. Perspective itself, the consciousness of one as a point of reception in space, is the most mystifying relation to the world in general, and, for our purposes here, the same applies for the reception of sound. When sonic characteristics themselves become musical, that is when the noise (“non-music”) of the environment is listened to as if it were music, the elementary experience is not that of subjectivity or agency, it is of be-
ing lifted and carried, pulled upwards, away from the sense of belonging. Listening enacts this abstraction. It is to be in a space of endless calls and peals with no one there to hear them, no proper listener, one wandering tangentially through a convulsing and thick field of sound. To stand within oneself in listening is to cut the bond of reception and phenomenology. All around appears the inevitable debris of the present moment, incomprehensible as to its historical meaning.

The unrecyclable is a relationship to history, to wandering in the detritus. McLuhan had it that such wandering, through study, can reconstruct the experience of, for instance, primitive man, or any man, because the medium, whether writing or etching, relates much more than the content of any given communiqué ever could (Gutenberg 5-9, 19-21, 61-3). We can know people, places, et cetera—but the price for such knowledge is that we cannot know ruin. In reconstructing the ephemera of the moment in its meaningfulness, relating true knowledge of the artefact to its context, we lose the moment of its passing, in fact excising from our knowledge massive portions of history of decline and disappearance. It is, within the historicism that purports to take each thing as itself, as if we are witness to a series of tableaux, each object and item authentically its own, that procession standing for all the eras and epochs leading up to our moment, but the gaps between hold nothing of interest. The major consequence is that, in effect, we assume as our ontological truth the impossibility of understanding our present moment and hold it that only after we become unrecyclable debris, yet again, for others, they will be our judges and historians. There is then a certain absurdity of writing a history of the present moment. Against that, McLuhan attempted to write the history of the era of the “global village,” through the objects of our media, in order to stage a purely immanent relationship to knowledge located in or actualized by objects. Yet, unacknowledged, the trash of all previous epochs still remains—trash is the reminder of that which was lost.

The unrecyclable is the sound event, but in a larger sense it is the sound-context. The metropolis, as heterogeneous as it is in regards to itself, has never generated its sound as pure cacophony, multiplicity, as its singular and unchanging font. What will be missed even with field recordings and the film, that synthesized and audible geography, is the immersive moment of the sound-context. What continually occurs is the copying of no particular object—a repetition that continuously destructs. What makes this moment unrecyclable is not that it fades away never to be heard again, this unique and unitary happenstance, but that it is copied over and over without specificity, in the construction of new buildings, new stages (for sound or other purposes), in the practise of enframing, recording, and releasing music. To learn to listen to non-music is to learn to listen to the distant continuum of passing. The recording of an ever-passing background noise, its discovery as a type of listenable material, its registry, however tangentially, into the
domain of music as such articulates an awareness that much has been left out. Many sounds and noises proper to the era recorded have been lost in that act. When one feels oneself counted amongst the rabble, “amongst all the sweepings and . . . all the dead cats of civilization,” (Conrad 46) the recording becomes the strand that links this undifferentiated mass to the inherent possibility of being heard and thought, the capacity to see loss, waste, trash, as the embodiment of lost experience. It is a loss we can register as a feature of the recording—or, more generally, of any historical object. Field recordings, in their difference to the tradition of artistic composition, stage the trash of music and hold it up for our perusal.

Experience, once lost, cannot be recovered. The analysis of the objects of history works according to the premise of reconstruction, that a strict belonging can be established by the discovery of one or the other object because of its proper relationship to its time, so that what was once forgotten by us due to the passage of time can be experienced again. Yet the trash of an era, the unrecyclable, is that which cannot be forgotten because it cannot be assimilated or known—it appears like an apparition. The garbage of streets, their evocative cacophony, is their primal character. It is that which is un-phenomenological, unmediated; in other words, the relationship to trash carries a mystical character, and any history or criticism must be able to see the present moment not through ingrained and enacted ideals, but through trash and rubbish, as its essence worked out in worthless articles. Anything genre-defining or major, a work of great renown redefining the knowledge of the moment, is synthetic and future-bound. Its moment is untimely because it speaks of its futurity; any major artefact speaks in compressed and ciphered expression of a later, greater, and generalized acceptability.

In focusing on the minor and the ignorable, the unrecyclable transposes one from active subject into the object of history and arrays and enumerates the paths and directions leading up to and from the moment. An ever-greater portion of experience as of the modern moment has become visible (or audible), and even if such experience remains minor in importance itself, as in the relative obscurity of field recordings, these items, objects, become paradigmatic of our time. In the history of art and work, the ecstatic step-out into the minor has involved one’s dedication to the field. This affection, in terms of tradition, folds into constituting historical categories and the various disciplines. The unrecyclable as such indexes everywhere we have been, all that we have heard, the given codex of the possible as it was accomplished. To pass into it, in music for instance, details the experience of the composer and the creative listener. A critical distance and capacity emerges. Composition takes on the absurdity of intuitive leaps and the nonsense of new structural arrangements. When such absurdities become axioms and instil new musicality—the cosmology of music changes.

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For any interested in listening:


The compilation *Audible Geography*, Room40, 2008.


The netlabel Public Record, hosted on ultrared.org.
Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. “Some Reflections on Kafka.”


