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## ACOUSTIC TRAVELLING - ACOUSTIC EXPERIENCES

The Acoustic Identity of Places and Spaces

A speech with acoustic examples

by

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*Translated from German by Walter Wittich*

In our culture audio experiences are first of all visual experiences. This is because we live in a visually dominated civilization. One of its basic assumptions is that the facial sense, meaning eyesight, decides if we find our way through this world or not. Eyesight is considered the most authentic of our perceptions.

Our society does not trust its ears. It overall believes what it can see. At law court, for example, an ear witness is usually less credible than an eye witness. And in foreign countries and cities we usually try to acquire them by their sights: we go on a sightseeing tour. There is nothing wrong with that. But how obviously does this way of approaching the world exclude that we also perceive realities, specialties, and attractions of foreign cultures with the ear.

Most of all non-European cultures offer special "ear-sights" or "audio sights". Unknown languages, noises, and music- that is one thing. There are acoustic sights, acoustic experiences- they don't have to be loud or spectacular- which cannot or can no longer be experienced in our own culture as the basic requirements for differentiated hearing are hardly given at all anymore. The following is about such acoustic experiences.

**1. O-Sound: Burma-Tape: B 70-110**  
(Shwedagon Pagode in Rangoon)

This original sound is one of my favorite recordings.

A Buddhist monk recites his prayers. Birds fly through the scenery, twitching their tunes. In the background, soft murmuring, steps of bare feet on marble floor- you can hardly hear it.

Sometimes bells accentuate the acoustic scenery. Everything that presents itself here acoustically in- I find that such a rich and balanced way comes together by chance to this composition, which isn't really one: not in the meaning of intended design, not in the meaning of intended interference in the acoustic event.

In our high tech consumers society we only make few acoustic experiences. Naturally there are all sorts of sound events. But they hardly leave room for a variety of differentiated acoustic experiences. [I will discuss the reason for that later.] Our facial sense is bombarded instead. Part of our basic sensual experiences in everyday life is the written word, television, the numerous posters, in general all objects that surround us. We live in a world that is completely visually designed, where we can hardly find anything whose appearance is left to itself.-A world of pre-set pictures and pre-set shapes that especially in the omnipresent advertisement have been designed to be easily perceived. Competition is strong, strategies become more perfect, and vision is getting faster. Actually, listening is our topic. But: if you want to talk about acoustic experience, you have to talk about visual experience first because in our visually dominated society, the way of seeing dictates the possibilities of hearing.

In opposite to the visible world, one can notice that the intentional design of the acoustics did not go beyond poor initial tries. They are basically reduced to actions by environmentalists and urban architects to save us from the worst: an overgrowth of noise. But how to structure the immediate environment in a pleasant acoustic way, and to do that in a way that our sense of hearing does not dry out- this question is still waiting for its solution. Why? Maybe because hearing is such an ambivalent way of perceiving.

Faster seeing-faster hearing: an example: music for entertainment, one of the few willingly designed sound events of our consumer society. It usually uses simple melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic motifs. Every even just slightly musically talented person is able to follow easily. Music for entertainment does not work with differentiations in dynamics- so there are no shades of loud or soft. And it transmits mood, atmosphere, existential feeling directly, without beating around the bush. Often it is enough to open your ears for a short moment. There is nothing wrong with that. But acoustically there is not much to discover, hardly any acoustic experiences to make.

Faster listening almost has to mean: no (or only in exceptions) aware listening. There are radio stations that intentionally pursue this idea. With their intentionally designed "acoustic wallpaper", they follow the principle of not creating acoustic sights. These are audio professionals that must

have lost all their trust in the sensual possibilities of the ear. Aware listening is not comfortable: because it is not the usual stunning attraction of the visual. You have to get involved, have to hear into it. To listen to the acoustic appearance of our world in a conscious way is doubtfully effective: it's irritating as it is not fixed shape, not defined iconography or of defined expression or message. But most of all listening, aware listening, is expensive: it demands our highest value, time. Maybe these are the reasons why our high tech consumers society makes a lot of offers to our eyes but hardly creates anything worth listening to.

## 2. O-Sound: Uganda tape I (Bus station in Kampala/Uganda)

Every evening at 6 p.m. when the people in Kampala city leave work to go to the suburbs by bus, the concert of the conductors at the bus station starts. They yell out destinations and want as many passengers to board their bus as quickly as possible. In the following recording it is easy to follow the changes in perspective: first the total. Then it slowly approaches the event. Individual voices can be heard, come closer, and disappear, are substituted by others. The homophone whole sound that we heard in the beginning dissolves into a polyphone diversity.

What kind of acoustic experiences do we have in our central European everyday life? - Our civilization, as I have mentioned, is none that creates specific sound events. But it's also none that specifically avoids sound. It's kind of indifferent towards acoustic events, basically they are no topic at all. The sound events that surround us are mostly created by chance, unwillingly, as side effect of specific functions. A refrigerator is supposed to cool, an excavator is supposed to move soil, and an airplane is supposed to transport people across long distances as quickly as possible. But all these things also make noises: sound that is not intended but that we have to deal with if we don't want to put the basic functions of our industrial and consumers society on the spot. So, sound is kind of an everyday garbage. And because of this, our sense of hearing is rarely considered important. The acoustic impressions of our everyday life are usually considered amorphous, accidental, a blur. Few of them signal something that serves communication or carries meaning. They are none of our business and we did not ask for them. Corresponding to that we have developed subconscious psycho-acoustic mechanics of selection and ignorance. But soon our ability of ignorance reaches its limits. How, for example, could you ignore the friendly neighbor who entertains the whole apartment building day and night by blasting his stereo? How could you ignore the hundreds of trucks that pass your home day and night? Or the street construction? Or the airplanes on the airstrip? Or all of this together? Should you ignore in a more consequent way? Desensitize yourself more perfectly? Reduce your own senses more perfectly? Can you? And even if you can, what is the result?

## 3. O-Sound: Burma-Baku tape 2, A 667-690 (In the Jungle of Borneo, or better, what is left of it)

The sound of jungle for me is most fascinating. When I dove into the sound world of a jungle for the first time, in Zaire, I was surprised that the jungle sounds completely different from what I expected. It felt like I would enter a room that was filled with hundreds of most extreme electronic shades of sounds: each and every one of these shades literally scratched and bit my ear and brought my hearing to the limits of what I could bear: a very intense acoustic and sensual experience. The following recording is a very personal original sound that I recorded in Borneo and in which I, as a recorder, play a big part. At 35 degrees Celsius, 95% humidity, I and another person move under a complete roof of green through jungle with no trail. You can hear that I am at the end of my physical resources.- In the beginning, one can hear relatively light jungle acoustics, but just a few steps later, up in the trees, there is a spiral of acoustic movement in which the sound of the jungle changes completely within a few seconds.

A noisy world forces us to become dull as a means of survival. A dullness also forced on what is important, exciting, and worth listening to. There are cultures where acoustic ignorance would be

lethal. In the jungle or the savanna, for example, the slightest acoustic changes can announce events worth noticing like a change of weather or dangers like the approach of a predator. Sharpened listening is the basic requirement of life and survival. "It's the ear that penetrates the darkness, not the eye!"-this is a saying of the East African Massai. It emphasizes the superiority of the ear compared to the facial sense, not only in the real, natural darkness, but also as a means of realization and recognition in general. As an organ that filters through sounds in between and does not fall for the obvious superficial appearance. Where we, in our culture of writing and picture, refer to something black and white on paper, the Massai (and many other peoples in Africa, Asia, and Latin America) rely on: I have heard it with my own ears, which implies that contrary to us, these societies trust more in what they hear than in what they see.

#### 4. O-Sound: Africa tape 91, B611- (Muezzins in Shela)

This recording was done in a small village on the East coast of Africa, close to the border of Somalia. Three Muezzins call from three different directions and distances for the evening prayer. A wonderful event for spatial acoustics: in the foreground, the sea that splashes against the wooden corpse of the Dhaus. Left, right, and far in the back, the calls for prayers. But the specialty of this original sound, for me, is that this evening prayer is interwoven with the natural course of the day: every evening right on time after the sunset, the crickets strike up with their music simultaneously with the Muezzins.

Because of the acoustic overload in our everyday life, we developed a longing for peace and silence. We need peace and silence to collect ourselves, to gain energy, in order to be creative ourselves. But here, silence in the purity of the word, is an illusion. The Big Peace, The Big Silence- of Death- does not exist in life. Because acoustic events are permanently there, even where habit taught us not to listen. Silence sounds, silence can be heard.

Silence is not a fact, not a condition, it is more of an experience, one of the most fascinating acoustic experiences, and probably the most central one.

Because silence means that fine tuned listening is possible, that you can listen deep into space, that you can perceive directions of sound events, and the diversity of sound colors, the interference of acoustic courses, their series, their development, their simultaneousness. Looking at it this way, silence is the requirement for acoustic experiences because they make you aware that listening is possible. It is like a sparsely furnished room where you can perceive each piece of furniture and appreciate it without being disturbed by spacious furniture which blocks the view: a room where our perception can move freely and where it can find new ways of relating all over again.

But silence perceived in this way is the exception in our everyday life. The sound carpet of engines which is omnipresent in our cities day and night covers up most sound events, neglects what there is to listen to, and thus reduces the possibilities of acoustic experiences.

In our industrialized, motorized world, most big cities sound alike or similar. An example: In Bangkok, it was almost impossible for me to record characteristic sounds of that city. All I had on tape was the sound of Japanese middle class cars, sometimes driving, most of the time in a traffic jam. I just sounds like Berlin, Paris, or Los Angeles: the noise of engines does not allow any other sound events which could be specific for the respective place: the voices of the native people, their music, their craftsmanship, their trade. Acoustic experiences are only possible where there are no other dominant sounds that block out other more delicate or more distant sounds. Silence is a reservoir which has not been completely discovered by our civilization.

In those barely industrialized countries of the so-called third world, there are few engines. Here the main focus of perceptions are the voices of the people who mostly express themselves with great passion and joy and like to make themselves acoustically noticeable. That is probably connected to the fact that they do not share our Western European and romanticized value of silence. For them, silence is power, a force of nature which they want to resist: with their voice mostly, with which the individual can participate in the lively sound of the home.

**5. O- sound:** India- tape 13, A 10-  
(Laundrymen at the shore of the Ganges River in Benares)

A characteristic sound of everyday life in India: laundrymen . A lakes and shores they beat the dirt out of the laundry of their customers. Here in Benares, at the holy bath places of the Ganges River, we hear the echo of the percussion concert of the laundrymen between the high outer walls of the palaces. Acoustically this beating of laundry is carried by voices of the pilgrims, pious beggars, street vendors, monks, and priests.

One of the most important acoustic experiences on my acoustic journeys is the variety of craftsmanship that- because mostly done without motors or engines- are specifically acoustically noticeable: the variety of ways of treating material of wood, metal, stone, straw: hammers, files, adjusting, stacking... The squeezing of sesame in oil mills, the rhythm of beating laundry on the Indian rivers and lakes that we just heard, or the sounds in the barber's section of any city in the Orient: the clicking of scissors, the scraping of razor blades, the sound of finally powdering the customer's face with lavender.

In Burma, a country with hardly any cars and few paved roads, one of the sounds you will encounter many times is the creaking and squeaking of bull-carts, the friction of wooden wheels on sand trails.

All these are noises that we must have had earlier in time, they got lost with the change of our society: acoustic journey as a journey into the past whose acoustic nature becomes sensually present and possible to experience.

Journeys into the past, these are also journeys into parts of areas in Africa and Asia which are more or less untouched (even though some of them already show the signs of environmental catastrophes): still: there nature exists in a much larger dimension than elsewhere.

Everyone who experiences the amazing soundscapes of a tropical thunderstorm knows, how deep such an event is carved into memory. The rush of water after a monsoon rainfall that seeps into the soil. The roar of a herd of buffalo that chase across the plains. The bizarre, almost electronic world of sounds in the jungle which can be intense enough to stun all of your senses:

last year, for example, in Borneo, I could discover that these noises and sounds become increasingly rare and valuable. For me, Borneo was the prototype of jungle and I thought it should be easy to collect jungle sounds there. But the dominant sounds were of chain saws, trucks, and high speed boats. The legendary jungle does not exist there anymore. The sounds that I was looking for I finally only found in a small national park.

Besides silence, the chamber music-like polyphony of a soundscape, there is the symphony. The big whole sound: with ostinant basses, with instruments that lead the "melodic" thus horizontal line, and the medium layers which take over the "harmonic" shades and influence the sound in its vertical.- In symphonic environmental events like this one- just as in listening to a musical symphony- you can concentrate on each single voice, try to follow its course, dedicate yourself to its shades of sounds, and its acoustic procedures which sometimes expose themselves or get exposed by others. And you can give yourself away to the whole sound. But just like in every other well composed and well performed symphony, it will never happen that the single groups of "instruments" will cover each other. More so, they will complete each other in their separate parts to a big acoustic unity.

**6. O-Sound:** India tape I A 17 (25?)  
(Train station in Mathura/North India)

A stunning example for the symphonic in everyday life is the events at the station in Mathura, a city in the north of India. Dozens of beggars, newspaper, tea, and grocery vendors, signal their presence to the travelers. The steel wheels of the trains are checked with hammers. Families say good-bye to relatives. A small group of soldiers salute their officer. The conductor is pressured with questions. One can feel the immense pressure to participate acoustically in order to enrich the symphonic event with their voice.

The design of what we call our reality- what I mentioned earlier- is mostly influenced by our visual perceptions. For those who exchange the eye with the ear to relate to their environment acoustically, it is possible to have special esthetic experiences. Experiences which open for us a world beyond pictures. Sound events only rarely articulate themselves in a "program-musical" way. The acoustic is foremost a world of abstraction. That is why it is so irritating to many people to relate to their environment through their ear: because they cannot identify what they hear with their picture-like image of reality: They hear but they really want to see, and there are no pre-set pictures. Far off from regular categories of perception and everyday aim-oriented rationality, the acoustic can reveal a surprising creature of visions in our world: there are things which do not sound the way they look, there are things, processes, and people, which make noises and sounds which are unexpected.

Aware listening brings us close to aspects which we often enough ignore: use of space and material, sequences of movements. Every material has its specific sound. Wood sounds different from glass or leather, tin different from stone or paper. Depending on how you make the material vibrate, you get different results in sound: with knocking, brushing, hitting each other, rubbing or plucking. Everything that sounds leads us back to what material it is and how it was treated. Close to this is the aspect of space: every space, every body, every three dimensional object, has its own sound- if sound events happen in it, or if it moves- vibrates. A bucket, oil tanks, indoor public swimming pools, ropes, tin cans, erasers, bottles, vibrate in different ways, break sound waves in different ways. In a city built of concrete, steel, and glass, steps and voices sound different than in a city built of loam. Every three dimensional object is an acoustic instrument. All visual appearances can transmit themselves through the ear.

As a consequence of that, it is only natural when sculptors like Rolf Julius, Ulrich Eller, Christina Kubisch, and others, use sound as a resource for their work. Because with sound you can build space, non-material space, that still relates to the material. Every sound creates its own space, every sound is a sculpture.

#### 7. O-Sound: India tape 9, A 660- (Temple in Madurai/South India)

This original sound, recorded in the huge Shree-Meenakshi-Temple in Madurai, South India is a very good example of how to listen to spatial sound. This is a temple with numerous corners and many huge halls which thousands of people move through constantly. Some pray, some stroll along and talk, children play. You hear the sound of bare feet on stone floor. And all of these sounds mix in a way that is characteristic for the architecture of this place. The walls of the temple reflect the sound, this way they decide the duration of the individual sounds, they filter sounds with higher pitch, influence the shades of sounds to a whole sound, to a sea of sounds: the space creates its own music. The space composes.

"The eye leads mankind into the world, the ear leads the world into mankind." , with this aphorism nature philosopher Lorenz Oken, a contemporary of Pestalozzi, puts together a theory of perception. Here the eye has a very active part, it makes us move, interferes in our reality, guides, and by focusing on a particular object, simultaneously others disappear from our field of vision. This way, the eye designs its own reality and selectively shapes its own perception.

As the listener, the person depends on the acoustic events. The ear is always open, cannot be effectively closed, and has hardly any way of acoustic selection.

Whoever dedicates himself to the sense of hearing and wants to have serious acoustic experiences has to open himself with full equanimity and has to accept that there is only a minimal and limited way of shaping his perception and sensual experience. He has to be patient and open towards acoustic perceptions which on first sight might not be very spectacular, might be rough or unapproachable. Only if you take your time and you give yourself to the flow of the acoustic, there is a chance that you will find yourself on a shore somewhere, discovering treasures and adventures. If you quit too early, you will never know where the journey ends. If you only open your ear for a short while, there is little chance for surprise and challenge, attraction or intensity.

8. O-Sound: Africa 91 II: A  
(Walk through Lamu)

I think the following recording that I made on a walk through Lamu, Kenya shows what kind of beauty you can discover if you allow yourself to be led by your ear. Lamu is a city in the north of the east African coast, strongly influenced by the Arabic culture. The city is on an island, there are no cars. Lamu is a city which still exists in traditional culture. There are little alleys which run opposite to the coastline to catch and guide what little wind comes from the sea. These alleys are framed by buildings with a few levels, which in old tradition were built with coral stone. What we will hear in the following recording is sounds of everyday life: Shrouded women returning from the market, men returning from prayers at noon at the mosque, workers, curious playing children that follow me, sound from cleaning the hallway, laundry, or dishes. People that cross my path and say hello. Steps on stone, steps on sand, steps on wood. All of this is easily recognizable. These are sounds which can only be produced by this city, with these people, their series of movements come of their materials and their order of space. All of these acoustic events come together obviously to an in itself harmonizing musical continuum, to an acoustic ready-made.

To communicate with your environment in an acoustic way digs out something which seems to disappear from our senses: something which exists independently from our human will for order and gestalt. The acoustic material, the acoustic process, in the midst of its creation, raw and untreated tailings, unfinished in its shape. Listening allows sensual experiences which are not fixed in the perception of the moment and given a limited shape. They work against our civilization's urge for defined expressions, defined images, and search for what is in the flow and what exists on the edge or beyond our hierarchies of perception.