

## Sound Fetish Tendencies by John Levack Drever

If beautiful landscapes could be eaten they would be photographed much less often.  
(Michel Tournier, *The Ogre* 1970)

### Some History

This paper is formed of a collection of pointers concerning practices of sound recording and attitudes to the listening of recorded sound. This unspectacular procedure dates back to 1877, thanks to Thomas Alva Edison's invention of the: Phonograph - which *via* mouthpiece, diaphragm and stylus, tiny changes in air pressure are harnessed in order to indent an analogy on to the, Phonogram - where these marks are stored<sup>i</sup>, and Phonet - the combination of stylus and diaphragm that reads and translates the indentations back into audible vibration of air particles which bares some semblance to the original sound picked up and transferred by the Phonograph. Edison's proposed uses of the phonograph were multifarious: letter writing; speaking books for the blind; a tool for teaching elocution; a disseminator of music; archiving voices of family and the famous; sounding automata such as musical boxes and dolls; speaking clock; preserving speeches by politicians; an educational tool, such as an aid in the learning of languages; telephone answering machine. The voice plays the lead role for Edison, with music dissemination just a bullet point among many; remembering that etymologically speaking, *phono* + *graph* bonds voice with writing. In 1890 the desire for archiving of voices of famous people of the day for posterity, beyond say an echo in the valleys, commenced, including recordings of the voices of Florence Nightingale and Alfred Lord Tennyson.

One of the founders of field recording was Ludwig Koch. As manifestly a relatively spoilt 8 year old, in 1889 Koch received a phonograph and several phonograms from his father. His initial instinct was to go in search of autographs in the form of recorded human voices, rapidly banking up an impressive list including the voices of Helmholtz and Bismarck. His recording of his caged pet Indian shama songbird in 1889 goes down anecdotally as the first recording of bird song (a first that is contested by Edison also in 1889). In his early sound collection was a recording of the only surviving organ played by Bach (for which Bach composed the cantata *Höchst erwünschtes Freudenfest* for its inauguration in 1723), stags roaring as requested by Hindenburg, and an array of bird song which was to be his life long passion. Despite his interest in natural history recordings he was commissioned by the cities of Cologne and Leipzig to make *sound-books* of their "typical noises". As he write in his memories:

For nearly every city has its characteristic sounds. From both cities I now have recordings of sounds that will probably never be heard in them again, because of the action during the war. (Koch 1955:27)

The Nazi regime was to destroy most of this pre-war collection. Immigrating to London in 1936, he quickly set to work on creating a *sound-book* on British wild birds. Neville Chamberlain, it was asserted spent too much time listening to Bird song with Koch instead of to the threatened people of Czechoslovakia (Koch 1955:41). *Sound-books* were Koch's chosen medium for the distribution of his work. As well as his British bird *sound-books* he created: *Hunting by Ear* (1937) in collaboration with D.W.E. Broch, which details in edited field recordings and text the sounds of fox hunting and in particular the sophisticated acoustic communication between huntsman and hound, and *Animal Language* (1938) in collaboration with Julian Huxley, which as the title suggests explains *what animals are saying*. The second 78rpm in this *sound-book* presents the sounds of the African savannah, which is quite a feat, since all the recordings were made in Regent's Park and Whipsnade.

Koch is one of a handful of 20<sup>th</sup> Century pioneering phonographers who have dedicated their life to field recording. Other prominent figures in the history of environmental sound recording, spanning disciplines from film sound design, radio drama, documentary film, ethnography, soundscape studies, ornithology, ambient music and *musique concrète* include: Bernie Krauss, Luc Ferrari, R. Murray Schafer, Beatrice Harrison, Humphrey Jennings, James Fasset, Pierre Schaeffer, Wendy Carlos, Karl-Birger Blomdahl, Steven Feld, Walter Ruttmann, Walter Murch and Carl Weismann.

The term *Phonographie* was coined by the French *musique concrète* composer François-Bernard Mâche (Mâche 1993), actuating the notion of 'sound photography' hand in hand with the action of 'writing with sound'. In the past few year there has been a massive proliferation in the numbers of those engaged in field recording and editing as an art form, as open-air takes preference over armchair. Call it soundscape composition, anecdotal music or phonography, there are now as wide a range of approaches and compositional intentions than there are those active in the field. In my opinion, common to them all however is an irrational attitude over the ontology of recorded sound, put more crudely: 'recorded sound valued in particular for having something to do with reality'.

### **Phantoms**

The phonograph was born out of and into a culture obsessed with the occult. Science alone could not fully explain Edison's talking device to the Boston *hoi polloi* of the late 1870s, often falling to the world of the magical for explanation. Even the artifice of the *séance* was adopted in marketing demonstrations.<sup>ii</sup> In a demonstration by the Edison Company in 1887 it was reported that:

Bells rung, drums beat, noises natural and unnatural were heard, a cabinet revolved and flashed fire, and a row of departed skulls came into view. (Davis 1999:64)

A perennial icon in this matter is that of Nipper the dog, a global trademark that can be seen on most high streets and record collections today. In 1899 the Gramophone Company (the leading gramophone record making and distributing company of its day) purchased a painting of a dog and an Edison-Bell cylindrical phonograph, which was to become the 'His Master's Voice' trademark, also known as 'The Talking Dog'. Nipper, depicted in the painting, had lost his master, the landscape artist Mark Henry Barraud, and was being looked after by Francis Barraud. Francis, who painted the picture, imagined that the dog's attention had been captured by his dead master's voice emanating from the horn of the phonograph - there is also a speculation that in the original the dog is sitting on his master's coffin. This image replaced The Gramophone Company's previous trademark of the Recording Angel: "an angel with a quill pen sitting on a disc and drawing a groove around himself" (Dearling 1984:50). Michael Taussig considers the image of the faithful Nipper and the horn, symbolises "the naturalness of the mimetic faculty in a technological age" (Taussig 1993:210) and reinforces the salient magical ontology of the phonograph.<sup>iii</sup>

Electroacoustically mediated sound's presence - although to the eye is dislocated from its original sounding body, spectrally compressed and spatially reduced through the media's recording and/ or transmission and playback process - is still a physically multi-dimensional haptic experience, as the fluctuating air pressure impacts on one's body; putting into play the notion of hearing as touching from a distance.<sup>iv</sup> Loudspeakers may be concealed to the eye, rendering a recording a semblance of the 'real', which may in turn penetrate deeply into the psyche.

The anthropologist Edmund Carpenter names the phenomenon of voices being "freed from flesh, capable of instant transportation anywhere" (Carpenter 1976:11) via electronic media, in particular radio, as 'Angelization'. From his fieldwork observations in New Guinea he notes:

Elvis Presley's voice and face are popular in many parts of New Guinea, but neither he nor any of the other stars whose songs many of the young know by heart have ever set foot on this island. They are truly stars: pure spirits whose very purity makes them environmental and therefore immediately acceptable. (Carpenter 1976:151)

The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes:

If a phenomenon - for example a reflection or a breath of light wind - is only presented to one of my senses, it is a phantom, and it only gets close to a real existence if by chance, it became capable of speaking to the other senses, like the wind when it is made visible through the upheaval of the countryside. (Chion 1993: 50)<sup>v</sup>

Thus, Merleau-Ponty posits that all acousmatic experience may be rationally perceived as a phantasmal experience: that is if you ignore the visual cues such as the vibrations on the membrane of the loudspeaker.

Recognising the phantasmal quality of the disembodied pre-recorded voice, Morton Feldman set up a particular relationship with 'living' and 'dead' voices in *Three Voices [for Joan La Barbara]* composed in 1982. The work is scored for two recorded sopranos and one live one. As a composer who wrote almost exclusively for live instrumentalists the appearance of two pre-recorded electroacoustic voices in this work is significant. In the original performance all voices were that of Joan La Barbara. The pre-recorded voices are untreated and all three voices in the live performance are balanced. Joan's three voices inhabit the acoustic space of the performance arena together, blending the living with the dead. The analogy is taken further as Feldman regards the two loud speakers as tomb stones for his recently departed friends: one for the artist Mark Rothko, the other for the poet Frank O'Hara (who wrote the text in *Three Voices*).

Pointing back to our pre-industrial days, Walter Ong in his treatise on the impact of the development of speech, writing and print on culture, writes:

Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power. A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste, and touch a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert, even dead, but if he hears a buffalo, he had better watch out: something is going on. In this sense, all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms is 'dynamic'. (Ong 1999:32)

It has become a preverbal thinking that if an object is emanating sound it is sufficient evidence to confirm that it is animate; no sound implies that the object is dead. For Ong “sound is indicative of here-and-now activity” (Ong 1967:113). We can observe these vestiges of *primitivism* in product design today where sounds are intentionally introduced to denote the functioning of an appliance to the user, although the actual process of the appliance may not produce sound as a by-product. Product designers have found out through error that if for example a microwave oven becomes silent during a set programme it is often considered broken by the user and is consequently broken by the user, as they force the appliance's door open.

Ong takes the idea of “sound implies animate” further, on relating the notion of presence with that of hearing the human voice, be that live or pre-recorded:

One cannot have voice without presence, at least suggested presence. And voice[...] being the paradigm of all sound for man, sound itself thus of itself suggests presence. Voice is not inhabited by presence as by something added: it simply conveys presence as nothing else does. (Ong 1967:114)

Sigmund Freud's investigations into the causes of the emotion that has been classified as 'the uncanny' (*unheimlich*), picks up on a range of examples. These include:

"doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive" (Freud 1998:157)

"whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate" (Freud 1998:157)

the idea of the double (*Der Doppelgänger*)

familiarity yet simultaneously estrangement and irrationality

Combining these points we arrive at an awkward meeting point on the recognition of hearing one's own disembodied voice through playback. Carpenter points out one such case in point from his ethnographic work:

When they [the Highlanders of New Guinea] first see pictures of themselves or hear recordings of their voices... It's as if they had vomited up an organ; they cover their mouths, almost as a delayed reflex, trying to prevent this loss. (Carpenter 1976:114)

### **Cause or Effect**

Michel Chion, who edited and refined the *Traité des Objets Musicaux* in the *Guide des Objets Sonore* (1983) pejoratively named his colleagues who incessantly referred to their sound-object's history in their compositions as *fetishists*:

The composers of the GRM tended to Fetishisms, which have to do principally with focussing attention on the sources of the sounds and the means where by they are produced, where as the sounds themselves are what really count, and they can be made in any and every way. (Chion 1993:53)

In his *musique concrète* composition manifesto, *L'Art des sons fixes* (1991) Chion dictates that, "the composer makes a complete distinction between sounds and their source...[having] got rid of the presence of the cause." (Chion quoted in Cutler 1994: 12)

However *fetishist* causal approaches to composition (i.e. those that have not endeavoured to purify their sounds of their cause) may be, the listener will always ask upon grasping a sound: 'What is its source?' It seems to be locked into our cognitive system to ask such questions. Trevor Wishart, a leading UK based acousmatic composer, writes:

...in our common experience, we are more often aware of the source of a sound than not and studies of behaviour and aural physiology would suggest that our mental apparatus is predisposed to allocate sounds to their source. We can see in a very crude way how this ability was essential for our survival in the period before our species came to dominate this planet. One needs to be able to differentiate between harmless herbivores and dangerous carnivores...(Wishart 1996:130)

Wishart sees the exciting potential for the acousmatic composer to exploit our primordial listening system:

Thus when we are sitting in the concert hall listening to the Beethoven symphony the landscape of the sounds is the orchestra. When we are sitting in our living room listening to a recording of the Beethoven symphony the landscape of the sounds remains the orchestra. The loudspeaker has in effect allowed us to set up a virtual acoustic space into which we may project an image of any real existing acoustic space such as that of the concert hall or, for example, in the case of a wildlife recording, that of a wood at night. The existence of this virtual acoustic space, however, presents us with new creative possibilities. The acoustic space which we represent need not be real and we may in fact play with the listener's perception of landscape. (Wishart 1996:136)

There is a debate as to whether sound recording is a science of reproduction or an art of representation. The film theorist and semiotician Christian Metz recognises that:

Auditory aspects, providing that the recording is well done, undergo no appreciable loss in relation to the corresponding sound in the real world. (Metz 1980:29)

Film theorist Rick Altman, on the other hand argues for the important role of the information that is added or lost through the recording process of sound:

The variable introduced by sound's material heterogeneity, along with the system constituted to record (that is, represent) it, lie at the very heart of film sound. Though they may constitute distortions for the sound engineer, the marks of the sound narrative and the recording process that appear as part of any sound record constitute the very text of the sound analyst, the fundamental signs of the sound semiotician, the basic facts of the sound historian. (Altman 1992:30)

### **Sound Artist as Vivisectionist**

We may hold the projection of recorded sound as an act of reanimation and transplantation. Sound born and born-again into fresh time and space, experienced anew at the moment of reception. The sonic artist regarded not as taxidermist master of slight-of-hand illusion, rather vivisectionist master over life and death, time and space. When sound is electroacoustically dislocated from its autochthonal habitat – no longer *in situ* – transported to alien locations, it is recontextualised, physically and semantically transformed, creating different dialogues between itself and its surrounding resonating and signifying environment. The authority of the artist stipulating what will and will not be included, filtering through, and/ or imposing, the artist's own inherent or adopted ideologies and systems of representation over the soundscape. The artist inscribes herself/

himself deeply into the 'web' of the soundscape, and like Benjamin's surgeon, "abstains from facing the patient man to man" (Benjamin 1992:226-27).

On considering power relations, photography bares some pertinent parallels to phonography. Sontag on relating the camera to the gun writes:

There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder - a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time. (Sontag 1984:14-15)

Jean Baudrillard displaces notions of representation in mechanical reproduction further, articulating his experience as a practising photographer as well as a cultural theorist he remarks:

...it is a process of capturing things, because objects are themselves captivating. It's almost like trapping things - like trying to catch the primitive dimension of the object, as opposed to the secondary dimension of the subject and the whole domain of representation. It's the immanent presence of the object, rather than the representation of the subject. (1997:33)

Reflect on this, from the work of Carpenter again:

Throughout New Guinea it is commonly feared that if one's name or image falls into the hands of the enemy, he may use it mischievously. Sorcerers believe they can render even the mightiest helpless by naming, or injure another by introducing his likeness into an unpleasant situation. A sorcerer who possesses any part of his victim, anything once him – hair clippings, footprints, etc. – has him at his mercy. (Carpenter 1976:149)

What Carpenter had observed from his own ethnographic fieldwork had been classified by the eminent Victorian writer Sir James Frazer in his classic 'armchair' research of religion, magic, superstition, mythology and primitive rituals in World's cultures, *The Golden Bough: A Study in magic and Religion* (1922), as sympathetic magic. Frazer divides sympathetic magic (the Law of Sympathy) into two categories: contagious magic (the Law of Contact) and homoeopathic<sup>vi</sup> Magic (Law of Similarity).

Contagious magic's principle is:

That things that have once been conjoined must remain ever afterwards, even when quite dissevered from each other, in such a sympathetic relation that whatever is done to one must similarly affect the other. (Frazer 1967:49)

Frazer notes that Contagious Magic could be achieved, it was believed, through severed parts of humans such as teeth, hair and placenta, and even accomplished through the impressions left by a body in sand or earth. He is proud to note that the superstition of 'injuring footprints you injure the feet that made them', was global and alive and well in Europe. That is why some of us make our beds when we get up in the morning.

Homoeopathic Magic, in a sense part of the same continuum as Contagious Magic's tenet, is when:

The magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it (Frazer 1967:14)... the most familiar application of the principle is that like produces like is that attempt which has been made by many peoples in many ages to injure or destroy an enemy by injuring or destroying an image of him, in the belief that, just as the image suffers, so does the man, and that when it perishes he must die. (Frazer 1967:16)<sup>vii</sup>

In Michel Tournier's sinister novel *The Ogre* (1970) the protagonist Abel Tiffauges becomes obsessed with photographing images and recording sounds of children. Tiffauges values such media for its capacity to hi-jack the object recorded both magically (i.e. sympathetic magic) and imaginary, in order for him to *possess*, for a moment, those children (Tournier 2000:100).

For it is plain that photography is a kind of magic to bring about the possession of what is photographed. Anyone who is afraid of having his or her photograph 'taken' is only showing the most elementary common sense... One cannot avoid comparison with the painter, who works openly, patiently and patently laying down on the canvas, stroke by stroke, his own feelings and personality. The act of photography, on the other hand, is instantaneous and occult, like the wave of a magic wand transforming a pumpkin into a coach, or a maiden who is awake into one who is asleep. The artist is expansive, generous, centrifugal. The photographer is miserly, greedy, avid and centripetal. (Tournier 2000:93)

But for me, though I do not reject the power of magic, the object of the act of photography is something greater and higher. It consists in raising the real object to a new power - the *imaginary power*. A photographic image, which is indisputably an emanation of reality, is at the same time consubstantial with my fantasies and on a level with my imaginary universe. Photography promotes reality to the plane of dream... The lens is the narrow gate through which the elect,



those called to become gods and heroes *possessed*, make their secret entry into my inner Pantheon. (Tournier 2000: 93-4)

William Burroughs, feeding off the public paranoia caused by covert surveillance techniques used in the Watergate Affair of 1972 proposes:<sup>viii</sup>

By playing back my recordings ... when I want and with any changes I wish to make in recordings, I become God for this locale. I affect them. They cannot affect me. (Burroughs in Odier 1989:19)

Tuning into the notion of Sympathetic Magic from first hand experience he goes on to write:

I have frequently observed that this simple operation - making recordings and taking pictures of some location you wish to discommode or destroy, then playing recordings back and taking more pictures - will result in accidents, fires, removals, especially the last. (Burroughs in Odier 1989:18)

## **Conclusion**

As a practising phonographer myself, I struggle with these irrational issues, so much so that although drawn to composing with the sounds around us, my motivation has been impeded by my mind's blurring and questioning of reality, representation and power relations. I sympathise with the now retired war photographer Don McCullin, as he tries to explain his feelings on sharing a house with his life's work:

I published a book a few years ago and I called it, *Sleeping with Ghosts*, because I know that when I'm in my house and I'm down one end of it asleep, down the other end there's all these filing cabinets with this raucous noise going on down there. I mean, obviously it sounds to you as though I'm slightly barking, but I'm not. I'm totally in control of myself, and hopefully, I'll try and play some part in my destiny. But I know that living in that house, there is some mischief going on, down where those filing cabinets lie. You can't have that material, that energy in a house or in a place, without something going on down there. (John Tusa interview, BBC)

On my first public voicing of my feelings, (at Hör upp! Hey Listen! Conference on Acoustic Ecology 1998, The Royal Swedish Academy of Music) the chair of my session, the Québécois soundscape composer Claude Schryer, said into my ear: "John, you have an immature attitude, and the sooner you stop worrying about these issues your music will be much better". Slightly taken aback by this comment, I soon received more sympathetic responses from other listeners of my talk, who very much shared my feelings, in some cases more so.

On a commercial take, Steven Feld, who has produced a commercial CD, *Voices of the Rainforest* (1991), of the songs, voices and environment of Papua New Guinea asks similar questions:

Once you record something, do you imagine that you have an inalienable right to do whatever you want with it forever without consultation? Or if you paid somebody a few bucks to record them at one point in time, do you own their voice for all time? What's the nature of your moral, legal, aesthetic, and political responsibility to them over the course of time? (Feld 1999:18)

But it is not for me it is not just an issue of fair trade, I find it hard to reconcile my artistic practice with the vestiges of my inherited essentialist readings of reproduced sound;<sup>ix</sup> sympathising with Barthes as he writes: "I see only the referent, the desired object" (Barthes 1988:7). In response to my questioning I have been prompted by artist and theoreticians, retorting: 'What is it to compose, if it is not to appropriate and interpolate objects, concrete and conceptual, from our world', moreover, 'has not the musician throughout history, and trans-culturally been grouped with the thief?' Perhaps with the proliferation of digital media those essentialist vestiges in me will decline and I will acknowledge a semantic as well as etymological relationship between 'phony' and 'phoney'.

Although some of the conjectures I have referred to reside far from my personal position and every day experience, I do strongly adhere to Taussig's evaluation of mimesis, which draws from Frazer's Laws of Sympathy. That is:

The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power. (Taussig 1993:xiii)

Where I was feeling the weight of some kind of cultural responsibility on my shoulders others were seeing electronic media as liberating themselves and society in general from the shackles of semiotic fixity, augmenting the field of play. Baudrillard expresses this point:

I'm interested in seeing technology as an instrument of magic or of allusion - an illusion of the world, but also a positive kind of illusion or play of illusion. Perhaps this is the ultimate way of playing with reality. (Baudrillard in Zurbrugg 1997:38)

The French new wave film director Jean-Luc Godard offers us another way of looking at it, when asked at which pole, from fiction to documentary, he started in his filmmaking process, he answered:

...from documentary, I think, in order to give it the truth of fiction... (Godard 1986:181)

Generally speaking, reportage is interesting only when placed in a fictional context, but fiction is interesting only if it is validated by a documentary context. (Godard 1986:192)

Perhaps if I want my work to improve I do need to take to heart Schryer's guidance, embracing Hillel Schwartz proposition, as he writes in an attempt at a summing up in his cultural critique *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles* (1996):

Some may say that the twins, the Doppelgängers, the self-portraits, the Second Nature, the seeing double, the copying, and the reenactments are the best evidence we have of the playfulness of human beings. I would agree, and strongly recommend the virtues of companionship, joyful imposture, irreverent ventriloquism, communion with animals, hide-go-seek, the uninhibited spread of art and ideas, the doing of history. (Schwartz 1996:378)

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<sup>i</sup> Of which Edison regarded as a proto voice-mail.

<sup>ii</sup> For a detailed account of the metaphysics of the telephone and its genesis I refer you to Avital Ronell's *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (1989).

<sup>iii</sup> In *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (1996), Michael Taussig unfolds an ethnography of 'His Master's Voice'.

<sup>iv</sup> Evelyn Glennie, the profoundly deaf virtuoso percussionist, observed the haptic nature of sound being exploited at a concert of hers in Brussels:

The deaf were offered balloons to hold so they could feel the music through the vibrations. They were also sitting on wooden benches that had been rigged up for

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sound to come through the benches so they could experience it through their bodies. (Glennie: 1991:74)

<sup>v</sup> My translation.

<sup>vi</sup> Frazer's spelling.

<sup>vii</sup> Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) plays out an inverse process of Homoeopathic Magic, with tragic consequences.

<sup>viii</sup> During the Watergate hearings, it came to light that Nixon had taped his conversations in the Oval Office. (Dellaira 1995:204)

<sup>ix</sup> Perhaps these latent feelings relate to Freud's explication of the *Uncanny*:

It would seem as though each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to that animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has traversed it without preserving certain traces of it which can be reactivated and that everything which now strikes us as "uncanny" fulfils the condition of stirring these vestiges of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression. (Rivkin & Ryan 1998:166)

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