

Engines of Transformation; Intensive relations and sound



A paper written for the Cybersonica 2005 Symposium at the
Science Museum Dana Centre, London

April 2005

Aled Rees

As a methodological introduction to this paper, the following needs to be made clear:

I have proceeded based upon my own experiences with sound, as both a habitual listener and varied producer, and have proceeded especially with interest from those rare and illuminating moments when a connection with sound seems to revolutionise one's world view. I have then turned to the works and thoughts of those composers, musicians and thinkers whose productions and ideas have most definitely chimed with and sparked my interest.

I turn to the words of Thomas Clifton, as quoted within Derek Bailey's introduction to the book 'Improvisation':

'The question is not whether the description is subjective, objective, biased or idiosyncratic, but very simply is whether or not the description says something significant about the intuited experience so that the experience itself becomes something from which we can learn and in so doing learn about the object of that experience as well...' ¹

It could be argued that all encountered sound could be engaged with – as with 'music' (such that instances of accidental or incidental sound we come across in the world might render possibilities for perception – just as music is able to; in a varied and often wholly underestimated manner).

Hearing - is most commonly used as a part of the conjoined field of our day to day perception, informing on a direct level our consciousness of space and motion. To want to transform the faculty of sound engagement - such that sound in the world achieves the same levels of possibility to us as do perceptions of music – requires a certain intention on a person's part.

Such a transformation would obviously affect the conjunction of human and sound at each instance.

¹ Bailey p.XI

For me this thought also raises questions about what degree of awareness is involved in how one uses one's senses and why? Has one ever been aware of making a choice on the structure of one's cognition, or perception, or even consciousness?

Perception is not a fixed, immutable faculty - it has been transformed by growth and sociality, and by key events in one's life, there is no reason that this process cannot continue at one's own volition in a direction of one's own willing.

There need be no definitional end point in such a process.

Aldous Huxley believed that 'normal waking consciousness is at once our best friend and a most dangerous enemy.'²

La Monte Young - in interview said: 'I've noticed that a much greater part of the world is visually orientated and more capable of concentrating on visual stimuli than aural.'³

Stockhausen, planning a live performance of the intuitive piece; *Aus Den Sieben Tagen* in 1968, issued the following instructions for the performers:

'Live completely alone for four days without food, in complete silence, without much movement, sleep as little as necessary, think as little as possible, after four days, late at night – without conversation beforehand, play single sounds WITHOUT THINKING, close your eyes just listen.'⁴

This kind of ritual is aimed at removing the performers from almost every aspect of the content of their daily life cycles.

If one then thinks that normally, through the endless and unstinting repetition of these actions, these day to day staples of life, a certain kind of habit formed awareness and

²The Walls of Illusion, p.215

³ Selected writings p.30

⁴ See 'Bjork Meets Stockhausen' Hill

perception is ramified and concretised, cementing one's relation to the world. Cementing how one sees and thinks, and what one comes in contact with.

To very suddenly and completely break this structure; not eating, not thinking, not sleeping, not talking, not moving - this might 'deterritorialise' or profoundly reconfigure - the cognition of those involved - in action and abstraction, consciousness and perception. Placing them in an utterly different frame of reference towards the world, and opening new possibilities of what one takes in and how one might act.

The Aus Den Sieben Tagen instruction, whose permutations on one level incorporate a 'deep listening'⁵ intentionality, is a recipe - a diagram of action.

In short, *to rewire the perceptive / cognitive consciousness.*

Part of this then entails the intent that they will experience sounds re-invigorated, to hear and play them from a sonically starved perspective. But this kind of ritual cannot merely transform a person's sense of sound perception and interaction, and even if the sound continuum is the point of practical focus here, it will expose a wider field of relation. Affected also would have to be relations between sounds and feelings, sounds and ideas, actions and repercussions, knowledge in relation to sound and the contexts which sounds and performance run through. A veritable depth world of inter-connections; a rhizome - all of which could be used to inform the generation and selection of these sounds, and the selection of how they are used.

This manner of ritual draws cultural parallels; the starvation inspired vision quest initiations of Native American Indians, practises from tribal communities and other human encampments that maintain a strong connection to practises and processes of consciousness change. They offer the opportunity to those (sometimes) empirically unaware, that there are other zones of contact available for the perceiving body, <the dreaming body>, zones away from those engaged with on a day to day basis.

⁵ See Various articles by Pauline Oliveros, e.g 'Quantum Listening' : http://www.deeplisting.org/pauline/writings/quantum_listening.html

Experiences that typically get called; altered states, altered consciousness, states of heightened perception or awareness etc.

Within the space of the ritual, where the sonic incantation or refrain, or instrumental 'spirit catchers' are amidst a context of actions that (*at the very least*) seek to disrupt 'everyday reality' configurations of perception and thought.

Sound and song have evoked a beyond to the human world for time immemorial.

The fragmentally captured unknown; intoned, entreated, praised, thanked, expressed.

In following the Aus Den Sieben Tagen or similar ritual diagrams, one question might be - What does one experience or encounter through such a state? What role do sounds have in such changes?

Sound can be conceived of as a multiplicity; the swarm of its vibratory presence at every given moment of its existence, both the lines of motion or pitch, and the static pulses of rhythm, but also the fullness of each, the very matter of each.

Molecular and energetic.

As Beefheart sung on the track 'well':

'I heard the ocean swarming body well well'⁶

La Monte Young comments that the ear is a distinctly non-linear receptor and transmitter of sound 'generating its own harmonics at integral multiples of the fundamental even when presented with sine waves that have no harmonic content.'⁷

It would therefore seem that to fully understand its effects and ranges to us- it is essential to consider the physical properties of sound in conjunction with human sense perception, and in this matter –

Sound becomes an extended and conjoined phenomenon.

⁶ 'Trout Mask replica'

⁷ 'Selected Writings' p.39

It is not just its physical attributes; amplitude or frequency, nor even its passage as electricity through the body, through the brain, into a tentacled neuro-storm of translation or feeling.

The very fact that one can experience or dream a sound inside the head - from memory, or from imagined possibility. The fact that within a zone of no sound waves, a sound may exist seems to suggest that sound has alternate dimensions to its auditory presence. Not least of which is some kind of correlate with the dimensions of the mind, and of consciousness and in this sense (if separable) of perception, as that which feeds into consciousness with the notion of 'what there is'.

This sound is also an instant somewhere - at its source, an instant of friction, or disturbance, or overloading, or turbulence - a particular vibration. (Caught and recorded into the potential spaces of the virtual, or generated as above but part of a 'live' performance.)

When one considers sound as partly virtual, it is necessary to also consider it as an open ended field of possibilities, there is no saying how it will be perceived or 'actualised' by someone encountering it, it exists as a sea of potentiality between itself and the world of its possible, actualisable connections.

One could say that for the majority of encounters between sounds and people, there might be no noticeable changes to either – But that ignores what that encounter actually is, it is a *change*.

And it is the possible degree and manner of that change that needs to be brought into sharp relief.

Vibration can be seen as the most basic kind of refrain, an oscillation.

It may not be that this vibration is as simple as a repeated constant; there might be micro-deviations in its route and its frequency, turbulences or other subtleties of a lack of uniformity. But remembering here as Brian Eno has said that 'repetition is a form of

change'⁸ and that following on from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus whom I paraphrase when I say; 'one never steps into the same river twice' – then on one level, there is flux.

So even with the most reliable of things – the repetition is never a direct repeat.

It always returns, refrains, when it returns, it is in some senses returning on itself, as its double, it can for as long as it repeats - exponentially multiply back on its selves, like a virus.

The refrain may even be a double virus, it doubles when leaving its virtual state (the vinyl, data form, player etc.) and entering a human-animal host, it then doubles on itself with each further repeat.

Within the writings of Deleuze & Guattari the primary forms of communication and change or *exchange* between multiplicities is via contagion, through infection or transformation of the one multiplicity by the other, across borderlines.⁹

Perhaps this is the mode of sound?

To colonise or infect a nervous system, bringing with it to quote Deleuze and Guattari 'whatever non-sonorous forces have always agitated the production of music.'¹⁰

The extreme potential effect of this kind of refraining / repetition seems to be the possibility of disabling to some extent the dominant human cognitive mode and allowing other configurations of spatio-temporality to enter; to be perceived.

Perhaps indicating the powerful effects of some music forms that refrain themselves utterly; musics like drone, trance and other repetitive forms.

They might open the spaces of possibility for those engaged sufficient to pass the border of distance from the sound itself.

Young highlights two main approaches to 'get inside a sound'¹¹:

⁸ see 'Image: Music: Text' P.14

⁹ A Thousand Plateaus p.249

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.

¹¹ 'Selected Writings' p.35

One is that someone ‘...concentrates so heavily upon a given sound – he gives himself over... Even though I could be sitting here, all I am is an element of the sound.’

This would be an aspect of the idea of *becoming*, as espoused within Deleuze and Guattari, a becoming-sound which extends the composition of a person on the basis of what intensities they also are, incorporating other flows, or phyla of consistency. The kinds of examples of becoming they give are contained within the eponymously titled chapter of a Thousand Plateaus ‘Becoming-Intense, Becoming-animal, Becoming-Imperceptible’¹².

Young’s second main approach ‘...is to walk into an area in which the sound is so abundant that you actually are in a physical sound environment.’

Sound as a field of perception offers the chance as do all such fields – to be deepened to the point of experiencing the perceived phenomena as containing radical new differences, and perhaps even to a point of unfamiliarity at how something so ordinarily understood might suddenly become ‘otherly’.

As Stockhausen has explained; ‘I create alien worlds’¹³.

So, not only does the sense field have the possibility of being deepened in terms of sound, but there are the manifold fields of possibility of the sounds themselves.

Of frequency and placement, character and shape, the distribution of sounds within what Jerry Garcia called both an ‘infinite space’ and ‘an open ended cylinder’¹⁴ in reference to the possibilities of music. And from this, one has the opportunity to encounter with different ramifications - that within the sound world which has been *intentionally produced for encounter*.

These productions within the sense field after all, contain also the intent of the composer / musician.

¹² A Thousand Plateaus p.232

¹³ See ‘Bjork meets Stockhausen’ Bjork

¹⁴ ‘Walls of Illusion’ p.199

This intent would seem of key significance. What was being applied to the process and principles of the sonic construction one encounters?

Who was the particular guide on this sonic journey?

Stockhausen says that as the time comes to the moment when 'I have to act with my fingers, with my hands and my ears, to move the sound, to shape the sound. It is then I cannot separate thinking and acting with my senses...' ¹⁵

In this one move, Stockhausen identifies a unity (or better still an immanence) within the fields of thought, action and sense.

To act with one's senses?

Is this letting sound 'be itself'?

As Lamonte Young suggests, we should: '...experience them (sounds) for what they are... a different kind of existence' ¹⁶.

After all, when we have removed the barrier between thought and sense-action as with Stockhausen, then the perceiving can also be thinking, maybe human and sound think together?

The manifold actions of the body also then, maybe thought, bodies that are a composition in terms of forces. Not just the myriad bone, muscular, tendon and ligaments etc, but also a globalised 'feeling zone' feeding back with the awareness of the body's consciousness. This is a point of return once more, this time with the idea of perception as composition, as an ongoing composition between the nervous system-feeling body and its *immanent outside* (i.e. that which impacts upon it, with whatever degree of extensity or intensity).

Yet, recurrent among artists' is the theme that human beings are asleep, as Robert Wyatt sings on the Bjork track 'submarine': 'Shake us out of the heavy, deep sleep'. ¹⁷

¹⁵ 'Bjork meets Stockhausen' Bjork

¹⁶ 'Selected Writings' p.74

One aspect of this is that in some senses sleep represents safety, and correspondingly - outside the bubble of this safety exist dangers. Xenakis in *Music & Inspiration* says :

‘The artist who has to animate his imaginative powers in order to create thereby endangers partially, or altogether his sense of reality.’¹⁸

Then again, as Deleuze & Guattari say, ‘...there is a reality specific to becoming.’¹⁹

So, whether or not repressive ideas guard our surface level understanding of sound, it is the material itself which constantly offers itself as verification of its transformational possibilities.

As Henry Miller said ‘I verify by flight’²⁰.

Philosophical arguments should not get in the way of one’s engagement with sound.

—

Steve Reich used the words of an 18th Century Hasidic mystic; Rebbe Nachman of Breslov for the phrasal core of the first movement within his latest piece; *You Are (Variations)* refraining:

‘You are, wherever your thoughts are’.²¹

Boulez has said that: ‘It is only very seldom that the composer finds himself in the presence of a world that he has glimpsed... in a single flash of heightened awareness, a world he then has to bring into actual existence.’²²

Here I feel, there must exist a diagrammatic possibility, that the world which is being brought into ‘actual existence’ to use Boulez’ terms, might be the kind of world that helps

¹⁷ ‘Medulla’

¹⁸ Harvey p.34

¹⁹ *A Thousand Plateaus* p.273

²⁰ See Miller p.122

²¹ See ‘Boosey & Hawkes’ Website

²² Harvey p.25

to bring other such worlds into existence. By allowing others to experience them, be exposed to them, encouraging further the compositions that might render yet more singular 'heightened awareness' states as described by Boulez in the first place.

Stockhausen being interviewed by Bjork says about the quality of he himself somehow *being* in his own music. 'The most important thing is it is not like a personal world, but something that we all *don't know*. We have to study it, we have to experience it. If we catch something like that, then we have had luck...' ²³

Stockhausen's approach abandons the personal, the known-to-the-consciousness, it implies that one must *always* reach beyond one's seeming personal confines, into the areas that are unknown but that exist to be composed with.

Just across the border, whose presence often - we are not aware of.

I am reminded of the title of the 1999 album by Fushit Sussha, 'I saw it, that which before I could only sense'. ²⁴

—

When one considers the energy economy of bodies and their media, that bodies are constantly deluged by the world at large; a bombarding stimulation, leaking in and swarming over them.

All non-self-biological or 'non-internal' (for want of a better term) sounds come from outside the physical body. They come in, like water comes in, like light comes in, like proteins et al come in. These are energies of one form or another coming into and transforming within the porous energy body of the human (which then produces its own transformations, even if those are the productions of an organic consistency).

We are fed by light, by food and water but also I think by sound, as Holger Czukay said about 'Gesang der Juenglinge' by Stockhausen : 'This piece is one of the most exciting and also astonishing experiences a music eater can have'. ²⁵

²³ 'Bjork meets Stockhausen' Bjork

²⁴ see recordings bibliography

Though it should be remembered, not everything one can consume is healthy.

Others have taken the idea of energy further, as Lou Stathis wrote of Philip K Dick: 'He came later to see all things as a unified energy field in which we are miniscule capsules entwined with tiny, eddy-like pockets of wave-form energy manifesting itself as our personal realities.'²⁶

The painter Max Ernst said 'the life we lead as it were, takes place in a cage and we continually long to escape from this cage...'²⁷

Whether or not one credits the possible depths and available spaces of perception as transformation, or the role of energy within that; sound and *some* among those who use it, seem endlessly bent on producing new configurations, instances that generate new feelings in conjunction with human-animals, and that suggest adaptation and change is possible in the depth level apprehension of some of those configurations.

Some of those musician / composers even reach directly into the spaces I have attempted to describe, artists such as Stockhausen and La Monte Young (and more), indicating altered and altering modes of action through which sound may be engaged with.

If such as Max Ernst, such as Deleuze and Guattari, such as Aldous Huxley, such as Robert Wyatt and others, one is aware that there is a problem with the primary, 'everyday' mode of human cognition, then there can only be an individual choice and response as to what route one takes in examining the problem and resolving what it obscures.

But I suspect that those for whom sound is an ingredient within an experiment of existence have the potential to lead an open-ended singular path, and the maps for such paths only go so far.

As descriptions of possibility only go so far.

©Aled Rees 2005

²⁵ See 'OHM' website

²⁶ see afterword in Dick

²⁷ See 'Max Ernst'

Bibliography:

- Deleuze, G and Guattari, F; 'A thousand Plateaux' translated by Brian Massumi, Athlone, London 1992
- Jonathan Harvey; 'Music and Inspiration', Faber and Faber, London, 1999
- Derek Bailey; 'Improvisation', British Library National Sound Archive, London, 1992
- Henry Miller; 'The Tropic of Capricorn', Book-of-the-Month Club, New York, 1993
- La Monte Young & Marian Zazeela, 'Selected Writings' First Published by Heiner Friedrich, Munchen, 1969 – sourced from: <http://www.ubu.com>
- 'Bjork Meets Stockhausen - Compose Yourself' Introduction and Interview by Bjork
<http://www.stockhausen.org/bjork.html>
- 'Bjork Meets Stockhausen - Compose Yourself'; Stockhausen Text by Desmond K. Hill,
<http://www.stockhausen.org/bjork.html>
- 'The Walls of Illusion; a Psychedelic Retro' Ed Peter Haining, Souvenir Press Ltd, London, 1998
- 'Image: Music: Text', ed Marcia Pointon and Paul Binski, Journal of the Association of Art Historians, Volume 19, Number 1, March 1996, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, UK, 1996
- Philip K Dick; 'Time out of Joint', Millennium, an imprint of Victor Gollancz, London, 2003,
- 'OHM- The early guru's of electronic music' -
<http://www.furious.com/perfect/ohm/stockhausen.html>
- 'Boosey and Hawkes';
http://www.boosey.com/pages/cr/news/further_info.asp?NewsID=10960&LangID=

Contd.

Video recordings:

'Max Ernst' a film by Peter Shamoni, A co-production by Peter Schamoni-Film
Internationes, ZDF and RM Arts, Phaidon video, phv 6012

Audio Recordings:

'Trout Mask replica' by Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band; Reprise Records, A
Warner Communications Company, 1970

'Medulla' by Bjork; Wellhart Ltd / One Little Indian Ltd licensed to Polydor Ltd (Uk), 2004

'I saw it, that which before I could only sense' by Fushit Susha; Paratactile, 1999

Cover Image 'Synesthesia #1' by Christopher Reiger