

# Sympoietic Soundscapes: Listening Empathically to A-signifying Semiotics

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Considering thought as the crystallization of determination through our relation with the indeterminate, and capitalistic subjectivity as intrinsically linked with the idea of a totalizing consciousness and all its human, all too human correlates —representation of the ego, unity of the person, self-centredness of identity, contempt for non-human life, etc.—, we consider technologically-enhanced listening as an ethical, aesthetic, and analytical practice through the hybrid boundaries of machinic phyla and their a-signifying semiotics, a way of delving into the limits of the human understanding of things, of making kin with the world, of living empathically towards all the inhabitants of our shared planet.

*Sound Studies. Soundscape Ecology. Technology. Sympoiesis. A-signifying semiotics.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Everything is alive to the ears. In stark contrast to other senses, few things truly sound “dead”. From the smallest stream to the biggest megalopolis, whether we encounter lichens, people, or any landscape to be imagined, each and every being and/in becoming is an ever-new “open sea” —in the Nietzschean expression— for our ears to forget the old law, the old names, the old doxa. Death does not have it easy around our ears.

Both traditional philosophical discourse and casual conversation usually focus on the capacity technology has to make us more “human” —whatever that may mean in the respective tradition of the speaker. However, acoustic ecologists and sound artists alike have frequently taught us to focus rather on another side of technology —maybe not the opposite, but certainly different: those specific ways in which technology allows us to get out of the realm of the human that would be otherwise impossible for us to achieve. Technological interactions with our soundscapes are indeed an example of this.

## 2. SOUND AND TECHNOLOGY, BEYOND THE HUMAN

Through technology, humans are not only able to hear the world that surround us, but vast parts of it that would be simply out of our reach —this “reach” being located approximately between 20 Hz and 20

kHz and loud enough for us to be noticed. This means, for example, that most adults could “naturally” hear the vocalizations of many mammals, but only maybe 20 to 30 percent of the insect world (Krause, 2016). Likewise, without the aid of hydrophones, the entire aural life of oceans, rivers, or ponds, so deeply connected to our sense of wonder towards the sea, but also so important to biological and climate research, would be nothing but a blur.

Many animals produce sounds too high or too low for us to detect or “hear” without technological support. Nature’s highest-voiced creature is —probably— the Ganges river dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*), who produces vocalizations over 250 kHz —about 6 octaves higher than the highest note on a piano. From an evolutionary point of view, by the way, the Ganges river dolphin is really interesting. Having reduced their eyes to a point of lacking functioning lenses and thus “depending” on echolocation, recent research has shown their hearing to have developed in a very singular way, particularly in relation to the shape of the inner ear in ways even unlike the other platanistoids —thus maybe a key in understanding the *Platanista gangetica*’s survival (Viglino *et al.*, 2021).

At the other end, some whale species produce vocalizations only at 4 Hz (Krause, 2016). For the same reasons human-centred views on technology sometimes led to self-absorbed conceptions and views, trans-human understandings of technology could be the way to a wider notion of empathy,

simply because it is a way to more “ways”. At the same time, and for its own nature, the very act of listening is intrinsically connected with empathy —if anything, listening is empathetic.

The specific role of technology in sound practices involving direct intervention on the natural environment not only affects the artist but every listener, allowing all of us to decentralize the subject with respect to the question of subjectivity and its production, for it transfers the primacy of the expressing instance to a non-human enunciating substance, so a whole series of very interesting things could thus happen. In aesthetic terms, the notion of “substance” is pluralized beyond the semiotic-objectual level —a universe of ready-made definitions. In ecological and ecosophical terms, our own human all too human subjectivity is enriched, open to real contact —beyond language— with our environment, in the heterogeneity of its expressive matters.

Listening is, in itself, an ecosophical production of subjectivity. While listening, thinking about how to do it better and more empathically, trying to encompass all the creatures that we share the world’s soundscapes with, technology should always remain a part of the conversation. It certainly takes us closer to the fellow non-human animals around us that our “natural” ears and “God-given” senses could ever do. Micropolitics begins at home.

### 3. SYMPOIESIS AND EMPATHY

By helping us care, technology also helps us remember that nothing makes itself, that nothing is properly autopoietic but sympoietic —an expression Haraway used in *Staying with the Trouble*, 2016—. Listening-to is always, inherently, making-with. Any I-listen implies a **we-do**. Finally, “worlding” is a nice step towards rethinking our own boundaries, and certainly technology can help us through such endeavour, for it has helped listening itself to become a collective arrangement of enunciation. “Collective”, here, does not only mean part of a group or a set, but constituted by flows of every kind, whether technical, ideal, aesthetic... “[I]t’ does not represent a subject; it diagrammatizes an agency” (Guattari, 1984, p. 135).

When we place our ears —particularly with the help of wonderful little machines such as headphones, tape recorders, hydrophones, hearing aids...— wherever the world opens itself, we thus open ourselves to landscapes that could potentially cease to be reified, external —at least we could begin to do so...

Listening to the world means in fact to connect ourselves to a body without organs forever oscillating between a form of anti-production that becomes re-territorialized in all the already known

significations, and a form of hyper-production that opens itself —and everyone tuning in— to new connections. The strata of signification disappear. A continuum of machinic intensities surrounds us. “Just” sound —or, indeed, an ever-new land.

Contrary to the systems of mediation that seek to represent intensive multiplicities —singularities— through negativity, identity, analogy, opposition or resemblance (Deleuze, 2014), a-signifying semiotics, such as the pure flow of sonic phyla, know no possible “signification”. These machines function independently of any “meaning” they could represent or constitute to anyone. Its desiring economy is independent of any subject-object systems, of any strata of form-and-substance double articulation. There is no “semiotic consistency” to be possibly found.

### 4. SOUND AND HUMANITY

Sound proliferation is, in and of itself, a collective organization of a-signifying semiotics. Sound is a myriad. Sound precedes any “subject” and any “object”. Its desiring economy of sound, as desire itself, knows no subject and no “I” —for it is of no representative condition. “Signification”, and all the interpreters that come with it, are abandoned. We are not dealing with a different language, not even with a very differently structured language —it is simply not a language in any human sense.

In the end, to disabuse ourselves of any humanist illusions around individual subjection means also to get out of the constant subjugation of the world —a world that was not made in our image. If representation forces any semiotic machine to be constrained, to adapt itself, to fit in with ready-made economies they have nothing to do with, intensive, a-signifying machines, have their own system of encoding —they need no verifier, no thesaurus, no policing. Sound could really save us from humanity.

Traditionally, both art historians and art critics have reinforced the privileged position of the individual —or individualized— enunciation as the only true —or interesting— apprehension of the world. The truth of this perspective was ultimately the “truth” of the world. In this sense, or from this perspective, contemporary artistic interventions in nature constitute one of the most radical openings to these partial machinic enunciations of these other subjectivities that surround us. Consequently, art is the seed of a different, much richer production of subjectivity. The sympoietic nature of the existential territories apprehended by the artist, in their constituent irreversibility, in their singularization, in their questioning of the categorical subject-object fetishes, enables the artist the possibility of an ecosophical practice. Such is the case, I would say, of the fascinating work of Martin Howse.

Again, when the artist puts a recorder wherever the world opens itself, they open in turn to territories that have ceased to be objectified to appear as intensive, as matters that are nothing but semiotic scraps detached from all meaning and human codification, but no less alive, less rich—rather the opposite. What they—and we—hear, particularly when it comes to the geophonic and biophonic plane, is pure immanence, infinite virtuality, the chaomic expression of the world—of our, common, world.

(Likewise, this also brings us to a reflection on technique and design. Few things like ecoacoustics question more emphatically the limits of a hylomorphic understanding of the technical object. If we think about the evolution of the devices with which we go out to perceive and record the world's sounds, the notion of imposing an idea or an external form over matter is more untenable than ever.)

## 5. CONSIDER THE BEES

Through sound, we confront a myriad of machinic planes of consistency. An ever-new land. But. The smell of some old tropes emerges. Of course, it may very well be that this access to an ever-new sonic land made possible by technology, where abstract mechanisms preceding any actualization of diagrammatic conjunctions between signs and matter, living and proliferating beyond our little world of social fantasies, is the biggest social fantasy of them all.

Maybe. Certainty is nowhere to be found, and perhaps for the best. The conflicting deterritorialization of the infinite existential territories that we call “world” has little to do with what us humans represent around it. It does not matter how aware we are of this at a rational level, for precisely this very rationality is constantly projecting images of a world made to our measure, gerrymandering the infinite non-human subjectivities that it contains, muting them.

We can, indeed, be too awake, and the always so different arrangements of daytime life be turned into the monsters of enclosed representations and neurosis, constraining of every machine into ready-made economies. For, as Deleuze said, it is not only the sleep of reason which gives rise to monsters, “it is also the vigil, the insomnia of thought, since thought is that moment in which determination makes itself one, by virtue of maintaining a unilateral and precise relation to the indeterminate” (Deleuze, 2014, p. 38). Aesthetics deals with this very “relation to the indeterminate” and, as such, with the analysis of a capitalistic subjectivity that is intrinsically linked with the idea of a totalizing consciousness and all its human, all too human correlates: representation of the ego,

unity of the person, self-centredness of identity, contempt for non-human life, etc.

Notwithstanding, whatever happens is always below or beyond “people”, for it is always a matter of environments and machines, in a continuum that goes between ever-different domains, through ever-different arrangements. Rather than “alienation”—“which no longer means much of anything”—, we follow Guattari in preferring to speak about “subjection” and “subjugation” (2009, p. 181), the former dealing with the construction of “people”, the latter with machinic phyla—but both with power.

We could even say that, if there is such a thing as “landscape”, it is so because the world is simply much more than what our concepts and even our bodies can assume (López Silvestre, 2019). We are always confronting a sense of **excess**, for the moment we gaze, stare, or even glance at the world around us and see the proverbial abyss, we are indeed in danger of that very abyss gazing back at us—even though we should always distinguish that very human (representational, neurotic, constantly looking backwards) abyss from the non-human sympoietic landscape that surrounds us and exceeds us: the monsters within, and the infinite horizons on the outside.

Consider the bees in Pierre Huyghe's *Untilled (Liegender Frauenakt)*. Located outside of Kassel (at DOCUMENTA13) as a sort of **dépaysage**, the central piece of this kind of extended installation was a copy of a 1930s statue whose head had been covered by a living beehive. Any anthropocentric notion of individual creation, or authorship, is at best diffuse. We listen to the beehive, we recreate ourselves in the development of a plan based on the very futility of plans. As it is frequently the case with some of the best landscape architects and designers, Huyghe was searching for the minimal, most intelligent interventions for the new or most needed paths to be opened and for nature to proliferate, and simply go on (Rodríguez-Mouriño, 2021).

“In” the buzz of the bees, we hear a myriad of contingencies. The beastly nature of sonic phyla decentralizes our humanly limited subjectivity. We realize again that listening is, in itself, an ecosophical production of subjectivity, and that listening-to is making-with. While listening to Huyghe's bees, we make with the world, we are—in—the midst of this beastly process, ecosophically worlding with it.

## 6. CLOSING REMARKS

If thought is the crystallization of determination via a “unilateral and precise relation to the indeterminate” (Deleuze, 2014, p. 38), and capitalistic subjectivity is intrinsically linked with the idea of a totalizing

consciousness and all its human, all too human correlates, then, technologically-enhanced listening is an ethical, aesthetic, and analytical practice through the hybrid boundaries of machinic phyla and their a-signifying semiotics, a way of delving into the limits of the human understanding of things, of making kin with the world, of living empathically towards all the inhabitants of our shared planet. Geophony, biophony, immanence. It goes. They go. We must listen.

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