

Sonic Creatures

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"If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?"
[Anonymous]

"I discovered living creatures in rain water"
[Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, 1657]

I am lying on the soft leaf-covered ground, deep inside the forest at night, listening profoundly in the dark for hours. Despite the archetypal combined forces of darkness and solitude, as well as very real potential hazards, this is not a frightening experience but a transcendental one. I hear hundreds of tree frogs all around in a three-dimensional, naturally immersive, invisible constellation of sounds. Complex, intricate, all-encompassing, mesmerizing. But is it really the frogs that I am hearing?

The question is not related to any uncertainty caused by misperception or ignorance. This is not an illusion or a dream, and I am familiar with these frogs. Yet over years of profound listening the answer to such a question –both for these frogs and for so many other things in the world– has been shifting from a granted relational affirmative to an apparently paradoxical but definitively existential ‘not really’.

The classic philosophical riddle of the tree falling in the solitary forest leads to intense discussions on the role of perception and consciousness both to define what sound is and, more generally, to ascertain the very existence of things in the world. It is a riddle with a trapdoor into the core tenet of what philosopher Quentin Meillassoux calls ‘correlationism’^[1], a very long solipsistic tradition –more notoriously expressed in Cartesian skepticism and Berkeleyan idealism– which in essence contends that without consciousness there is no world. Certainly not a minor question but one that is easily understood as such and is evident in many popular forms.

I believe that my question with the frogs, however, might be a trickier one to grasp. In fact, most people would not even imagine it or accept it as a query. It arises not when we are away from the forest but when we are actually well inside it, right in front of the things that produce those sounds, those singing frogs in the trees. Even if the world would only exist when we are around, the question would remain the same.

It is also a question that would probably never arise in our normal daily life, when we –along with other conscious creatures– naturally and systematically use sound to recognize and determine those things that are the sources of the sounds. “This is the sound of a frog”, we say. It is a property of the creature; and it is a prominent one that allows its detection and identification in the environment, a manifestation that leads to the source. Conversely, for the same obvious reason, when we hear unfamiliar things we immediately and instinctively ask the question “what is that sound?”, when what we actually mean is “what is *the source* of that sound?”

And so we have naturally built and live inside an indexical web of logical identifier threads we call the sounds *of* things. In relation to natural environments, this is a crucial defining paradigm that is common to such apparently dissimilar fields as bioacoustics, film sound design, hunting, so-called acoustic ecology, canonical field recordings, so-called phonography and children’s animal sound books, to name a few. From infancy’s first discoveries to highly specialized professional skills, the reinforcing of indexical listening is persistent, systematic and overwhelming. What’s more, the indexical pull is so strong and consubstantial in these realms that it virtually goes unnoticed as the hidden framework of common hearing.

It is unquestionably natural, meaningful and indeed convenient for our survival to be able to recognize causes of sounds by establishing such indexical relationships. The problem, however, –and I personally see it as a colossal one– is the resulting oversimplification of our understanding of the world around us and the dramatic impoverishing of our potential interaction with it. Or, in other words, the fundamental effect upon the less mundane ways of our *inhabiting* of the world. This becomes a problem only because of a typical lack of awareness to counteract indexicality's inherent tendency to dominate perception and because of an authoritarian insistence on the exclusivity of this listening mode.

The most direct and common version of this perspective is of course to think of sounds *only* as properties of sources; the sounds *of* animals, for example. The more illustrated, recent and totalitarian version of this view is manifold and posits claims such as: simultaneously stating the impossibility of 'sound-by-itself' and the undesirability of such an attempt (by recent apologists of conceptual and epistemological sound art^{[2],[3]}); the inescapable necessary condition of sound as a semantic indexical entity^[4]; the unethical separation of sound and source by means of recording, or 'schizophonia', of the traditional Schaferian acoustic ecology^[5]; and so on. This is worryingly totalitarian for two very straightforward reasons. First, because this is already the overwhelmingly predominant perspective all around (in fact, in most cases the only one known); not only for those with a particular interest in sound but also for the average person. And second, because indexicality obscures and obliterates ontology whereas that is not the case in reverse: sound ontology is not a threat to the 'sources' (be they representatives of nature, culture or reality at large), as it is repeatedly claimed with horror and outrage when sounds are –so they say– 'taken out of context' or 'abstracted' from their ecological or cultural context^[6].

These latter objections have arisen with special vehemence in the context of the use of sound recording media, particularly when used with a creative/musical/artistic perspective. This is no coincidence, as it is precisely these two factors –the possibility of recording sound and the creative work with sound itself– that have acted historically as unexpected tools of revelation of the complexities of sound existential nature^{[7],[8]}. Indexicality is of course a subset of the wider representational paradigm, which dominates mainstream media usage and understanding, from 19th-century photography to 21st-century multimedia hyper-telecommunication. In fact, because of the overinflation, ubiquity and immediacy of (mostly superfluous and irrelevant) telecommunication, we live in a time of unprecedented and overpowering *mega-representation*. In the case of recorded and broadcasted sound, from the commercial music industry to current 'sound art', the representational paradigm reigns supreme.

In my personal experience, what I call profound 'field listening' has synergized with recording and with sonic compositional work to naturally produce a disinterest in the usual direction of sound recording as representation or simulation (as in canonical field recordings, 'soundscapes', new age sound relaxation industry or current virtual reality). Instead, the natural epiphany of living and working intensely and passionately with sound is the revelation –paradoxical only in appearance– of sounds as *things-by-themselves*. As opposed to what is normally assumed, this is not at all a separation from 'reality' but precisely the opposite, a true *penetration* into it. As philosophers Scott Lash and Jean Baudrillard brilliantly highlighted, representation moves us away from –not closer to– the world^[9] and ultimately "everything escapes representation"^[10].

My compositional and ontological appreciation of sounds as 'things-by-themselves' is akin to the recent philosophical realm of 'object-oriented-ontology' (e.g., Harman's 'Tool-Being'^[11]; Bryant's 'Democracy of Objects'^[12]; Morton's 'Realist Magic'^[13]). In essence, the latter is a Copernican-scale shift away from anthropocentrism in the understanding of the existence –and the possible interactions– of things in the world. What this means in the case of profound listening and the creative work with sound recordings is that sounds have the same ontological status than so-called 'sources' and, therefore, cannot be defined, justified, explained or understood by a dependence upon the latter, as it is usually the case. Sounds are properties or parts of something else only under a representational paradigm. Without it, or outside of it, we enter an entirely different game and things are definitely not what they normally seem to be. My contention here can be summarized very simply: *sounds are things as much as anything else*. Their assumed subservience to sources, while apparently logical and necessary, is illusory and existentially groundless. Their ontological dependence, while seemingly natural, is unjustified and unfair. Neither

their ephemerality nor their apparent immateriality –like those of very ontologically-qualified massless particles, for example– can deny them a full existential status. For the truly attentive listener –profound, iconoclast, primordial, with no ‘a priori’– the creative work with sound recording does nothing short of revealing and reinforcing the same equal ontological status for sounds as for sources.

I expressed the first level of such a disentanglement using the proverbial frog as follows: “as soon as the call is in the air it doesn’t belong to the frog that produced it anymore”^[14]). In other words, even though the sound obviously came from the frog, there is no such thing as the sound *of* the frog in a truly significant existential sense. Frogs do not *have* sounds. They generate them in a causal relationship as they themselves have been generated by a biologically-organized accumulation of previously-inert inorganic matter. That is, as a second level of disentanglement, we need to additionally recognize that *the frog itself also has a ‘source’*, like everything else. It did not gain its recognized ontological status because it appeared *ex nihilo*, out of nowhere; the frog is also an *effect* of some precursor causes and sources in the ecosystem.

So this not at all about ‘abstract’ sound or sound in an existential void. Quite the contrary, it is about the very concreteness of sounds, as specific manifestations of reality, and their existence *along with* other entities, at the same ontological level. Nothing more, nothing less. Ironically, it is precisely the usual source-centered, indexical and representational modes of listening that are by definition ‘abstract’, as they are driven by the recognition of (and refer to) abstracted categorical sources, such as ‘frog sound’ or even simply ‘frog’, which as such do not exist in reality. The unjustified demand for an inescapable causal and relational ‘context’ in acoustic ecology, for example, is somehow paradoxical for being antithetical to the very denomination of the discipline, which is itself based upon representation as far as sound is concerned. One could also argue that this is a questionable form of ‘ecology’, being fundamentally based on a second-rate ontological status for sounds relative to their sources. As long as sounds remain properties of other things and ontologically subservient to them, we will never be able to truly hear *them*. The usual question “what is that sound?” will remain a simplistic causal question and will never be able to fulfill a more profound purpose, such as showing a way down the *rabbit hole* of the remarkably unknown truly real that sits defiantly right in front of us.

I believe that the creative compositional work with profound listening and recorded sound –including so-(misleadingly)-called evolving actions such as ‘processing’, ‘transformation’, etc.– does not disconnect but rather deepens the connection with so-(misleadingly)-called ‘context’ or initial ‘reality’. This is precisely the value and the strength of a robust ontological vision: prototypical descriptions of ‘context’ essentially provide only superficial depictions of indexical categories that are in fact abstract by nature (e.g., there is no such a thing as ‘a tree’). In stark contrast to this, ontology scratches this surface to get to see concrete things face to face, thus getting closer to –not farther away from– ‘reality’. So, as opposed to, say, traditional abstraction in painting, what is usually called ‘abstract sound’ (in fact, typically used for sounds with unidentified sources) is paradoxically the opposite: a more concrete sound. If sounds are not simply properties or representations of some ‘sources’ but instead things in themselves, there is no such thing as an ‘abstract’ sound and all sounds are disembodied by their very nature. In my view, this is a much deeper form of connection to the world. And certainly a more *realistic* one.

There is an immediately discernible, startling and dramatically compelling consequence of this equal ontological status for sounds: the revelation that our ecosystem actually contains many more creatures than we previously thought. Besides all the normal creatures we are so familiar with, it is in fact teeming with invisible, ephemeral, four-dimensional (as they don’t exist without time), multiform, only apparently immaterial, still unnamed, but very real... *sonic creatures*.

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