

ON THE CONCEPT OF ACOUSTIC ECOLOGY [PENDING]

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Abstract

My keynote presentation considers various, related questions concerning what ‘Acoustic Ecology’ is, or could be, and some barriers I perceive to developing a field of enquiry further when it proceeds from a multidisciplinary community and has a variety of stated, and unstated, aims. The questions are ostensibly simple, but I suspect the answers may be somewhat more difficult to formulate.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this keynote, I wanted to try and pin down the concept of Acoustic Ecology — what it *does*, and who is doing it, and how knowing this may inform its future. So I suppose it would be easiest to start with a simple definition of Acoustic Ecology. This has turned out to be far more difficult than I anticipated — and even a cursory online search (Fig. 1) turned up some confusion, and a whole collection of other words that, it seems, one can use ‘instead’.

Fig. 1. Montage: Google search for ‘Acoustic Ecology’.



Faced with many rather vague descriptions online, I decided instead to consider Acoustic Ecology in relation to one of my own works, *Window*. (www.novamara.com/window)¹ (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 *Window* screenshot.



Window is an online work made from sonic and visual materials collected over the course of a year, arranged by month. It was made in memory of John Cage, in the centenary of his birth. There are several layers, including a layer of poetic text fragments, that need to be ‘discovered’, and a layer of short essay texts about Cage, or about listening and everyday experience. The sounds and images are very ‘ordinary’, all recorded from my bedroom window, and the text fragments are about quotidian experience – the small, subtle moments, memories, and experiences that make a home environment a ‘familiar’ place. Making the work is up to the user, who interactively moves the sounds around in place, selects which texts or times to explore, and — inevitably — listens.

I don’t think *Window* is a work about sound or soundscape. And certainly the work of mine you’ll hear tonight, *Making Place*, isn’t either —even more so. Most of my more recent work has been about the experiences that contribute to making a sense of ‘place’, and that includes listening experiences — but any use of field recordings is contributory rather than predominant. In fact, I made a conscious effort NOT to choose ‘good’ sounds or evaluate the soundscape. This was about sound at the edgelands of daily sensory experience — as it nearly always is. The sounds are not recorded especially well, and the environment is not sonically extraordinary, or under threat.

So I was playing with this piece and wondering: is it a ‘work’ of acoustic ecology; is it an ecological or an ecoacoustic work? Is it an *experiment* in acoustic ecology? And now I started to feel a bit of a fraud, because although I’m interested in listening (among other things and experiences), I’m not, primarily, interested in either acoustics or ecology. But then again, I notice that seems to be true of other people too. And, of course, I’m being deliberately naïve — I hope.

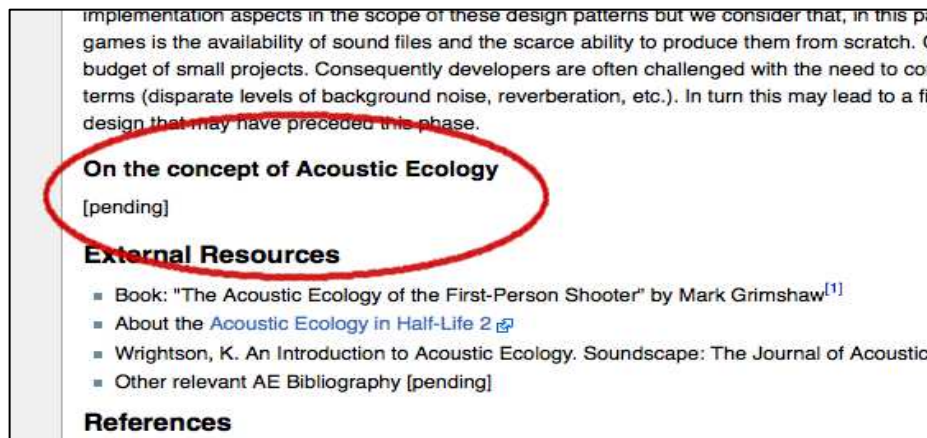
1.1 The concept of Acoustic Ecology

The title of my talk comes from a web resource on games sound design². There are several references to the work of Murray Schafer et al, and several other familiar names (to me) are cited, also the work of Mark Grimshaw, who wrote his PhD on Acoustic Ecology and the First Person Shooter game. Acoustic Ecology is presented (I quote) as a ‘central’ concern and of ‘strong’ importance. But the web page is taciturn when it comes to describing what it is (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Web Sound Design wiki.

¹ *Window* is discussed briefly here. For a longer essay about the work itself (and a link to it): Norman (2013). *Window — an Undecided Sound Essay*. *Journal of Sonic Studies*, 4(1). <http://journal.sonicstudies.org/vol04/nr01/a03>

² http://www.soundingames.com/index.php?title=Main_Page. The contacts are [Valter Alves](#) Polytechnic Institute of Viseu and [Licínio Roque](#) Centre for Informatics and Systems of the University of Coimbra



Pending is a useful word. It keeps things on 'pause/record'. It implies that more information is imminent, that something will come along, soon; that, somewhere out there, thought is being applied to the issue. The more I think about 'the concept of Acoustic Ecology', and read the various descriptions that surround it, the more it seems to be still pending in several respects. The best conceptual frame that I can come up with so far is that Acoustic Ecology *appears to relate* to both ecology and environmentalism, although the balance between them varies, and the manner of study is ambiguous at times.

Without a clear conception for something it becomes difficult to build on it, into the future. It is far more likely that, in search of some stability, goals will become conservative, and likely anchored in the past.

2. CARICATURES AND DEFINITIONS

In layperson's terms³, definitions might be described as a sign of consensus, arising at a point when folks reach sufficient agreement on the defining boundaries of a thing or idea to be able agree on a word or phrase to describe it without coming to blows (metaphorical or otherwise) — at least for a while.

But it's never that easy. Academics like to claim or invent this or that terminology, but that doesn't necessarily result in meaning. The very fact that scholarly discourse contains so much argument about whether this or that terminology is valid is just one indication of the power invested in definitions (I know others have discussed this issue too, in particular Leigh Landy has a conference paper on similar concerns). Conceptual definitions carry responsibility forward because others may adopt the language of a particular discourse unthinkingly, and often without critique.

Before you know it, people are wandering around saying 'I'm an acoustic ecologist' without having a clear idea of what they mean this to encompass, or of their responsibility towards its evolving meaning. Because of course definitions, and the fields they delineate, **should evolve** to accommodate change: the definition is not itself the thing or idea; in any field of endeavour or intellectual discourse, half the battle is in attending to this necessity. Otherwise, a lazy definition can stagnate meaning into self-caricature — to often-detrimental effect.

Popular conceptions are, of course, one very crass example of what I mean. For instance, I would say that I am, among other things a composer, and a scholar — but popular conception might differ in opinion. A single page of Google images tagged with either concept reveals the obvious popular conceptions of each (men, pianos, conducting, and manuscript paper; mortar boards, men with beards, respectively). These are caricatures, not definitions.

But, what about the concept of Acoustic Ecology? Well, the Google image search for those is similarly revealing: there's ecology (green, trees, save the world) and a smaller, hazier collection for acoustic ecology (green, trees, please bring headphones)

2.1 Does Acoustic Ecology have an identity, or an identity crisis?

When caricatures carry on into what one might call, loosely, a scholarly community's discourse, there's a danger of them arresting the kind of developing communication and exchange that will ensure that a field advances knowledge and understanding, and expands into a variety of relevant areas, relatively unhindered by stereotypical views, at least.

Is Acoustic ecology a science? After all, it is an -ology, and so purports to be a 'study' of something defined, and distinct from other kinds of studies. Certainly the Institute of Acoustic Ecology purports to focus 'primarily on science and policy' (<http://www.acousticecology.org/>). If Acoustic Ecology is a field of study, and especially if it is at root a scientific one, then surely there are established methodologies, and also a clearly delineated professional role? If that role relates to a field of study rather than, for instance, an 'approach' — that is, it serves an -ology rather than an -ism — it would surely be defined

³ And I stress that I am talking in very basic terms here, without delving into linguistic theory or analytic philosophy.

by a level of expertise and knowledge. Or is simply becoming more aware of sound than one was before — or wanting the same for others — sufficient to define oneself as an ‘acoustic ecologist’?

I recently worked for a science research publisher for quite a few years (not as a scientist), and the ecologist on the research staff bowled up to asked me what acoustic ecology was, having googled me a bit and seen the phrase in passing. I gulped, waffled a bit about ‘acoustic ecology’ as an interdisciplinary approach about sound, listening, the sonic environment etc. The ecologist, looked a little perplexed, though genuinely interested. ‘So’, she asked, ‘are you an acoustic ecologist?’ I was a bit stuck, to be honest. She had three biological research degrees and a rather impressive career in ecology research ...and, well, I don’t know much about biology...

How many of us would put ‘acoustic ecologist’ as career or profession when applying for an academic or arts-funding grant? Perhaps — but, how about a science grant? How many of us would employ it as a self-definition on a form for a passport, our tax return — those situations where we need to explain ourselves to the wider world, clearly and quickly?

So, who are the acoustic ecologists? I went on an online hunt for self-identifying Acoustic Ecologists, and didn’t find many — only one obvious candidate in fact:

Fig. 4 Gordon Hempton home page.

I am acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton. I care very deeply about quiet. As the Sound Tracker® I have circled the globe three times over the last 30 years in pursuit of Earth’s rarest nature sounds—sounds which can only be fully appreciated in the absence of manmade noise.

(<http://soundtracker.com/>)

Gordon Hempton has been collecting ‘nature sounds’ from wild and unusual places for many years, as many here will know. Hempton’s work is extraordinary, of course. His definition of acoustic ecologist is directive. What he is ‘pursuing’ is ‘untouched environments’. He is not, I understand, interested in gathering biological data for instance.

Defining Acoustic Ecology solely as a subdiscipline of a particular branch of biology, or ecology, is clearly ridiculous, since the people who align to Acoustic Ecology (an awkward expression, but I haven’t got another yet) come from so many other disciplines, and have such a wide range of overlapping areas of interest, expertise, and intent.

3. IS ACOUSTIC ECOLOGY A MOVEMENT — AN IDEOLOGY?

Here is the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology’s bullet point summary of what it works, with its affiliated organizations, to promote:

- Education — in listening to the soundscape, sharpening aural awareness and deepening listeners’ understanding of environmental sounds and their meanings.
- Research and Study — of the social, cultural, scientific and ecological aspects of the sonic environment.
- Publishing and Distributing of information and research on Acoustic Ecology.
- Protecting and Preserving existing natural soundscapes and times and places of quiet.
- Designing and Creating healthy and acoustically balanced sonic environments.

(WFAE — <http://wfae.proscenia.net/>)

To a casual visitor to the webpage, then, Acoustic Ecology appears to be something (as yet undefined) that is promoted (the WFAE’s word) by an organization with an ideological mission. Quiet is evidently valued; there is a ‘green’ ‘preserve and protect’ agenda. Personally, I share much of that agenda, or am sympathetic to it, BUT (and for me it is a big but): a mission is not a definition, nor does it offer a ground plan as to just *how* knowledge is to be advanced, and what bounds the field of inquiry; that third bullet point isn’t much help to a reader without knowing what Acoustic Ecology is.

I realize that I’m being a little harsh; forgive me. For me it is a fundamental ‘given’ that research (including artistic practice-based research) should inform policy, education, and societal ‘growth’. But knowledge should neither *equate* to mission, nor be confined by it.

It is only in popular conceptual imagination, for instance, that *ecology* is often directly *equated* with environmentalism. While Ecologists are often motivated by concern for the environment and the living beings within it, the discipline itself — in this case, the scientific study of the environment, and the relationships of living organisms to their environment — is a branch of knowledge. The distinction between knowledge and mission enables each to thrive and each to inform the other.

I think that maintaining this distinction and being able to articulate it, both within and beyond the community represented here, is equally important for Acoustic Ecology. I think that, right now — and for some time — it has not been maintained. It seems to me that the concept of Acoustic Ecology is confusingly muddled, between being a movement (with leaders, followers, beliefs and missions) and being a field of study (a branch of knowledge, even perhaps a delineated branch

of the science of ecology). With this insecurity of definition, certain, more ‘accessible’ assumptions — popular conceptions — can at times dominate the field.

3.1 Noise, quiet, roots

If a BBC interviewer turns up to interview someone here about Acoustic Ecology, I can guarantee that within a couple of minutes they will ask about airplane noise or loud headphone listening, or some other form of ‘noise pollution’. Noise is an aspect of sonic experience that is easily comprehensible and of general concern. But worthy ‘causes’ and figures can be noisy in themselves and result in caricatures: for many people here — and for many people *not* here — noise, or its absence, is not the main focus of their study.

As the opposite side of what appears to be the same coin — Acoustic Ecology is often presented as seeking quiet, tranquility, and silence (actual or metaphoric). However, Acoustic Ecology is not solely a call to ‘shut up and listen’.

There is an unusual emphasis on ‘historical provenance’ in discussions of Acoustic Ecology. There’s an undeniable romance about the ‘past’ of acoustic ecology and rehearsing a debt to Murray Schafer’s original, quite discrete body of work in the 70s (though he has done other things since) often predominates in publications that, in consequence, end up, effectively, as a series of re-circulating secondary sources.

If we keep on re-circulating air in this way, eventually we’ll run out of oxygen. We need to open some windows. Historical provenance and influence of ‘figures’ in a field have their place, of course. My own work, *Window*, pays tribute to John Cage’s role in my and others’ thinking about sound. But the past also needs to sit in the context of the flourishing present.

4. IS ACOUSTIC ECOLOGY A DISCIPLINE OR AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FIELD?

A break for listening. A gentle dawn chorus rising to meet the day:

Fig. 5 Burwell, Cambridgeshire (listen at http://www.novamara.com/?page_id=1391)



This dawn chorus was recorded from my back garden in Burwell, Cambridgeshire — my then home. But I need more than sound and listening to explain this landscape, which is rife with interdisciplinary connections; it takes far more than audibility to tease them out. The birds are there because of the magnificent chestnut trees, offering them the perfect ecological niche in a rural landscape that is otherwise given over largely to fields and lower level vegetation. The crows — raucous enough to wake the human inhabitants — have nested there for years, apparently unfazed by the chiming clock tower and Sunday bells (certainly less fazed than I was). The trees are there because of the graveyard: majestic rows of horse chestnuts, planted to provide pleasant, sheltered surroundings for both the graves and the living human visitors. The graves, with their social and physical human history, are there because of the church. The church is a solidification of a particular social fact, religious observance and associated community gathering. It’s there because of a particular human need, and in a manner that has been repurposed over time — today the religious services are fewer, but the mother and toddler group and ‘senior citizens café’ are thriving. The Remembrance Day service remains an important point of the year, during which the bells are muted to a dull thud, in memory of lost lives.

The ‘acoustic ecology’ of that environment is, of course, embedded within the broader narrative of a landscape that extends across and through many disciplines. And that was just a very simple, quite obvious, example.

4.1 Is Acoustic Ecology a discipline?

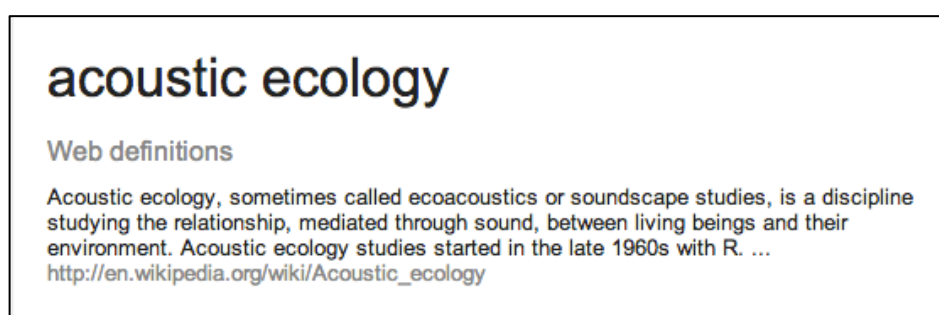
This one seems obvious:

... a multi-disciplinary spectrum of individuals engaged in the study of the social, cultural and ecological aspects of the sonic environment.

<http://www.wfae.proscenia.net/>

The WFAE description is an accurate observation, even if not a definition. On one thing, those working in ‘Acoustic Ecology’ appear to be agreed – that it is multi-disciplinary, possibly interdisciplinary. It is not a single discipline— which makes this Wikipedia definition slightly troubling:

Fig. 6 Wikipedia definition of ‘acoustic ecology’



5. WHAT IS ACOUSTIC ECOLOGY?

The problem of identity persists. The concept of acoustic ecology is still pending. My suggestion is to — just for a moment — forget the words ‘Acoustic Ecology’ (or other words, such as Soundscape Ecology, that used almost synonymously) and look at who is in the room. This one; now.

Symposia such as this are vital for allowing time and place for encounters between disciplines, and intellectual and artistic friends, and I’m very glad that they happen.

On the whole we’re comfortable with each other and share related vocabularies. In meeting to talk, share converse, and even argue (though possibly without shouting) we feel secure: we are already interested in each other, and know a bit about each other. We’ve met before.

But now, look at who is not in the room. (This is a more difficult exercise.)

Initially, there were thoughts of my presentation today being an on-stage conversation with a scientist. I admit that I inwardly sighed with relief when that didn’t happen, because I was pretty nervous about what I’d have to say —or how we’d talk to each other. Perhaps a scientist would have felt the same. Perhaps I was harbouring caricatures about scientists, (men with wild hair and white coats...) or worrying about having to find words for — or even defend — things I hold dear. However interested we might have been in each other’s point of listening, interdisciplinary blind dates are always daunting when you’ve hardly met.

In terms of true interdisciplinary discourse, many disciplines where sound and listening have a place already have still ‘hardly met’, except in somewhat superficial terms in one-off conferences or commissions, or similar meetings to converse ‘on stage’. Why is interdisciplinary depth so hard? Perhaps because it takes time to develop a way of talking usefully between disciplines. Perhaps because — despite their proclamations — the institutes where support for such research could lie are often inherently resistant to longer-term interdisciplinary research without clear ‘products’ in mind; it mucks up all kinds of funding and assessment models and threatens the *status quo*.⁴

⁴ I have found Barry et al’s paper, ‘Logics of interdisciplinarity’ useful in considering models for interdisciplinarity, and their respective motivations: Barry A, Born G, Weszkainys G (2008). Logics of interdisciplinarity. *Economy and Society*, 37(1), 20–49.

5.1 In conclusion

I've spent a lot of time being somewhat critical, in talking about what I think Acoustic Ecology is not, but actually that's because I think it is, undeniably, an incredibly positive time for sound and sound studies. For various reasons, including the 'green' agenda, sensory studies in general are coming into their own. And, it is also a positive time for action, in an environment where people, across disciplines, are increasingly appreciative of the role of listening and sound in human experience, including from an environmentalist perspective.

Maybe it's better to infiltrate disciplines and, like sound, work around barriers, strike up echoes in strange and unexpected places, amplify existing spaces and disrespect boundaries. Maybe it's time to separate mission and ideology from study and research, or at least to make the distinction, and the relationship, clearer. Maybe it's time to build knowledge, being cautious about being over-reliant on an uncritical acceptance of an historicized past. A field, after all, should be something that's dynamic, that's cultivated, tilled, and provides different sustenance from year to year.

These are all 'maybe's. I'm simply trying to stir some grit into the mix. I'm not here to make personal dogmatic proclamations about the future of 'Acoustic Ecology'. I'm hoping that discussion will arise — between all of us — at the panel tomorrow. But I would invite you to be thinking about what acoustic ecology is: in your view, to your ears; how your work, your study, and your knowledge, contributes to where things are going, what might happen next, and what is the *concept* that defines Acoustic Ecology.