

With no direction home

Get Lost

Let me confide that I have very little sense of direction. When I go for a walk I tend to keep going until I reach halfway (often a difficult concept), then turn on my heel and meander back home by a different path. It *usually* works out ok. Naturally this approach is best undertaken only if you have no particular place to go, and no particular desire to stick to a pre-defined route. But even an aimless walk still involves a choice at each corner; it's simply a matter of following intuition. That way, arriving home can always be a surprise.

*The sound of the scouring
Of the saucepan blends
With the tree-frogs' voices.*

Ryokan¹

A music made from the sounds of the world can instigate a transcendent, composed listening that re-encounters the familiar as something wonderful. Frogs and saucepans continue oblivious - *listening* is the 'medium' that is composed, and it is the listener that is transformed. But listening arises from individual perception, not from the sounds themselves. Nor does listening make any moral judgements with regard to sounds; no sound is of itself 'good' or 'bad'. The natural sounds of birds, tinkling brooks and insects are appealingly mellifluous, but the raucous clamour of post-industrial society has its own visceral attraction. And here I am only talking about the content of the sounds, rather than any meaning we might weave from extra-sonic connotations. Likewise, the various approaches to composing with recorded sounds from the 'real world' are not mutually exclusive or hierarchical: they can encompass the abstraction of the Schaefferian 'objet sonore', the ecological concerns espoused by R. Murray Schafer, the apparently passive indeterminacy of Cageian listening, and more besides. All these various theoretical approaches have charted ways of mapping the territory yet, even if not already attempting to do the engraving themselves, many have been unwittingly inscribed into traditions by the dogged enthusiasm of academic outreach (which, by definition, rarely reaches too far beyond convention). But a good theory is a temporary abstraction for testing out ideas, a way of thinking – it's a place to start from rather than to end up: there's no need to make a method of it. But, regardless of all that, listening can be a substantial matter.

But is there a way to express listening through sounds in time, comparable to film's monopoly on seeing through the moving image? Film narrative certainly speaks through images of real things, 'from life'. Though film requires a ridiculous amount of equipment and intervention to get it off the ground, on watching the end result it feels to be just you, and you just *looking* - at a world in moving pictures. Simplistically put, the images are reflected back on you – an individual - and on how you *see*. How often do you pull up a chair in an auditorium to just be aware of you,

just listening – to a representation of the world, in moving sounds? Can the end result of a sonic work be (or feel to be) a map of the world where sounds reverberate towards you – an individual who listens?

In Krzysztof Kieslowski's 1991 film, *The Double Life of Véronique*, the eponymous heroine receives an unidentified cassette tape in the post. On listening repeatedly to the recorded sequence of mystery sounds, she gradually identifies specific places and actions that lead her towards a station café, where her anonymous admirer awaits. This enigmatic film questions what is real at every turn, starting from the premise that the French Véronique and her *alter ego* in Poland, Weronika, are unwitting doubles, whose lives follow strangely parallel courses. And, as you might expect, the film is replete with visual allusions to reflection and doubles. But in devoting a significant portion of a film to a reading of sound, Kieslowski also brings images of listening to the fore. And after all, listening could be heard as the neglected mirror image of looking, cinema's usual obsession. But the recorded sound images are just images – pale reflections of the objects that made them – that lead the listening heroine to her physical goal. As usual, listening is a supporting character to sight.

Mappae Mundi

CD [7]

You got enough to tag along? I hope so, because a map is a composed intermediary that intends to be read: there need to be at least two people involved in making sense of it. Although I'm relying on you, I'll admit that the sound recording wasn't much good for the purpose. Most maps (you see) are visual representations that tell us what to 'look out' for. This is natural, since landmarks are stable and, in human terms, lasting objects while soundmarks – a term coined by composer and sound ecologist R. Murray Schafer – tend to change more rapidly over time. So the conventional map² does its visible work without a murmur. And nobody complains, although if in reality the world fell completely silent, we would stop and shake out our ears in disbelief. But it is not the sounds or their absence that I want to chart here, but listening.

Although some of the first maps in existence were simply written lists of directions, maps more usually represent an area compactly, in a reduced, diagrammatic form. The map is an explanatory tool that assists a journey from A to B, whether the territory is the surface of Mars, the intricacies of the human genome, or simply a conceptual means to think your way around a problem. Obviously, maps are not solely practical guides for physical travel, they can also enlarge our personal horizons and help us to understand things we may never see (or hear) in reality ourselves. We may never go there, but we can still imagine how the journey might have been. You can imagine listening to silence too, although it is a country you will never visit.

In the late 1200s, probably whilst holed up in a freezing cathedral in Lincoln (an area of England so bleak and flat as to belie today's knowledge that the world is round) Richard de Bello carefully inscribed an ornate 'mappa mundi'. This large map, which became known as the Hereford map, offers one way of seeing the world; its vellum surface is crammed with drawings of mythical creatures, descriptions of

monsters and strange semi-human beings, and the whole thing is optimistically topped with a detailed rendition of the Last Judgement.³ Is this effusive cosmology drawn, in any sense at all, from life? Richard's travels didn't amount to much more than a few trips between various ecclesiastical establishments. But although his world-view might have been restricted, his inner vision ran riot, nourished both by reports brought back by explorers, and symbolism brought forth from medieval Christianity. For Richard, as for his contemporaries, the monsters were very real. Even so, accurate images are hardly necessary for following this particular map's direction, where it's the underlying sermon that counts, for or against your personal salvation. (So - however inaccurate its proportions - the *mappa mundi* is still a route-map of a kind).

Today the world tends to extend outwards from our own domain. Our relationship with contemporary maps is often avowedly self-centred. An arrow or a blinking light proclaims 'you are here!', and that - along with 'which way's 'up'?' - is enough to start our trip to the cathedral. But it wasn't always that way. Medieval maps often placed Jerusalem, the Holy City, in the middle and heaven to the East - this was a familiar orientation (a literal turn 'to the east') in a society where the individual was not as prized as now. Yet some knowledge that we share with Richard, cloistered in his medieval cell, is that both mapmaking and map reading can provoke powerful journeys of imagination. If I spin a globe, unfold a street-map, or spread out a nautical chart between us on the table, I immediately bring a possibility just that bit closer. Reading a map is never an objective activity, since it is an aid to envisaging how a place - real, imagined or desired - might be, in reality. Running a finger across a printed meridian I commence the fiction that I might know the wider world, in all its detail. Yes, even the most dreamy perusal of a map of an unknown place is an attempt to put one's self in the picture. Like Richard, we sometimes pin back our ears to hear travellers' tales from afar.

CD [8]

Incidentally those same medieval explorers who brought back the tales of incredible beasts and peoples that decorate Richard's *mappa mundi* also created their own preferred map, which came to be known as the portolan. These portolans charted the ins and outs of a coastline with obsessive, filigree care, but usually neglected to describe the interior at all; it was hardly of concern while you were bobbing about at sea, trying to navigate in zero-vision. For both monk and explorer a great deal remained unseen, and was taken on faith as being (they hoped and prayed) just beyond their view.

But I am spending all this time poring over historical details, and there's no real listening going on. You are waiting for all this sound to speak up for itself? If mapping - on paper or in the mind - is inherently visual, how is it possible to reverse the situation so that listening becomes the first port of call, and looking is deemed inessential for the moment? How can we do it?

CD [9]

But in reality it is usually quicker to describe the world in visual terms - tall trees, rocky outcrops, green, the sea in the distance, and scuddy clouds above. With our speedy vision to rely on, why would we bother with unseen birds and distant planes? We take this perceptual preference for granted, and chart our environment accordingly. And when we make that chart, we gaze out from the middle of our

world – life is a panorama that rotates around our sight. When sight fails, literally or figuratively, the world stops turning.

Here is another feature of the acoustic world: it stays the same whichever way I turn my head. The view looking that way is quite different from the view looking this way. It is not like that with sound. New noises do not come to my attention as I turn my head around.... ..Perhaps there is some slight shading of quality, but the acoustic world is mainly independent of my movement. This heightens the sense of passivity.
(John Hull, 1990, p 82-3)

The world is what we, via our senses, make of it. Just by perceiving the world, we create a map that is peopled with symbols, similes, comparisons, and other interpretations. (See that woman over there? She looks just like my mum). Through our mapped listening we might identify the vestigial sounds of a late-night stroll in Dublin, a dusty street in Havana, or the sea on a wild Northumberland shore. Well, did you recognise them? In what sense did you recognize them? How did you recognize them - and by how much? All our attempts at mapping the territory create an imaginative palimpsest through which we reveal as much about ourselves as the world we try to describe. Like poor Richard (still in Lincolnshire, shivering towards heaven) perception inevitably peers out from the window of experience and cultural context. And, in this spirit, perhaps all works of art are mappae mundi of a kind. But while mapping and looking walk hand in hand, listening still stumbles along belatedly. How can we stride out confidently, when we're not sure where we are just yet? It takes time to get your bearings with sound.

So is it due to lack of practice? We are not used to thinking about listening to sound in our lives, so how can we make listening into art? Perhaps listening as a means of expression is difficult to rely on. It's certainly not that often in real life that we even sketch a map through listening, and then invite someone else to read it. But I would expect no less of Hildegard Westerkamp, whose entire work as a composer is focused on the sounds of the natural environment, what they might mean, and how we might listen to them:

This is a typical sound.

We have the very high, peeping sounds of the birds that are way up in the trees. Can you hear them? ... they're very quiet. And then you have the sea planes...that's Lighthouse Park.
(Hildegard Westerkamp, in conversation with KN, April 2002)

Have we just forgotten how to listen? Perhaps there were times when we did listen more acutely: R. Murray Schafer feels that 'the elaborate earwitness descriptions in works like the Bible and *A Thousand and One Nights* suggest that they were produced by societies in which sonological competence was highly developed' (Schafer, 1977/1994, p. 154). But it seems that nowadays the developed world tends always to look first and listen later - if at all. The television announcer who warns you about 'disturbing footage' is suggesting you might want to avert your eyes. You can turn your head away, you don't have to look. But once you start listening, you cannot avoid the starving child's anguished cry, or the scream of marauding hyenas. How often are you warned about those? And of course, this is why 'noise pollution' is so defined, and is such an aggravation – the unwanted sound is inescapable, and outside our personal control; and yet we can't help but listen.

But map reading leaves room for personal interpretation. Are you with me? Certainly we can huddle over the map together, planning that walk on the coast. But perhaps you see yourself marching along with the wind at your back, and the song of

the sea in your ears, while I pessimistically envisage trudging along a bleak sea wall, clutching the streetmap and hurrying to find the house before the weather changes. Even in your mind's eye, you can never quite duplicate my journey. Similarly, we bring our selves to listening - everyone's idea of noise is different.

A one-to-one map of the world

In 1971 R. Murray Schafer founded the World Soundscape Project (the WSP), basing it in the Communication Studies department of Simon Fraser University, Vancouver. Along with a group of like-minded researchers, among them composers Barry Truax and Hildegard Westerkamp, he set out to chart the sonic environment, and make an archive collection of recordings and studies of sound. The research that has arisen from this project ranges from sociological studies to musical composition, and continues to inform many studies of listening and the sonic environment. Among these studies, and similar related studies internationally, are a great many visual maps of sound environments.⁴

In 1996 the WSP, under the aegis of Cambridge Street Records,⁵ published a fascinating 2-CD collection, charting the soundscape of Vancouver through both recordings and soundscape compositions. Archive recordings made around 1973, and released then as 'The Vancouver Soundscape'⁶, are complemented by a group of composed works made in 1996 from Vancouver soundscape recordings, and a documentary comparing the changing soundscape, featuring Truax and Westerkamp. Although there are an increasing number of recordings of soundscapes, in part due to the ease and relative inexpensiveness of disseminating CDs, this collection is unusual because it listens across time, and from a variety of perspectives. With its mix of composed responses to sound recordings, documentary and straightforward archive material, it offers a range of mapping techniques. Some are more directive than others, but all draw attention to our listening relationship with the soundscape that surrounds us, as much as to the sounds themselves. And the members of the WSP unashamedly take an overtly activist stance, drawing attention to those sounds which, it is generally accepted, pollute and disrupt human experience – air conditioning hums, traffic density, ugly electronic sound signals etc. – as much as those (not always natural) that provide sonic well-being and pleasure. The message is that the presence of the unwanted man-made sounds could have been avoided if more consideration had been given not only to listening, but to listening as part of a more holistic perception of the environment. When Hildegard Westerkamp points out that the tourists taking a trip on the seabus have to 'listen to this sound for the ten or so minutes that it takes to cross – visually spectacular – Vancouver harbour' she is deploring the schism between visual and aural perception as much as the level of noise.

CD [10] hum at Vancouver harbour (from *The Vancouver Soundscape* CD)

Archives such as the World Soundscape Project, and a growing selection of small online collections of field-recordings and 'soundmarks' make a point purely by being there as museums of sound. They map a territory that has shrunk, and they draw our attention to a need for preservation, as poignant reminders of what we should take pains to keep, or may have already lost. Cloth-eared perambulators, we totter around noisily, while failing to notice that sounds have disappeared. For instance, the British

sparrow has declined significantly in numbers over the last 8-10 years - one survey suggests by as much as 59% in the South-East of England⁷ - and one suggested reason for this decline is that the level of ambient noise has prevented the birds from communicating with each other. My own piece *London E17*, made in 1993, opens with garden recordings in which the sounds of chattering sparrows were omnipresent. Now, in 2003, those sounds are far less noticeable in the aural landscape.

So recordings of lost or endangered sounds create a nostalgic map of the past that subtly nudges us towards a listening that can inform a moral belief. Much of the fervour concerning the preserving of 'threatened' sound environments arises from an ethical stance that regrets post-industrial mankind's unthinking effect on the natural environment as a whole. Though, of course, sound ecology⁸ charts the sounds and environments we should nurture not *only* on ethical grounds but also because they are beautiful, widely accepted as enjoyable and uplifting aspects of human experience. But, put more neutrally, sound archives map the course of historical change itself, and sometimes change is neither for better nor worse but is merely revealing. An archive sound recording can be as fascinating as a historical map that shows landmarks that have long since disappeared underneath layers of new building or through natural changes in the landscape. Perhaps preservation for the sake of it can be unnecessary or misleading, even damaging: another suggested reason for the sparrow's decline is the artificial re-introduction of the sparrowhawk, for whom it is natural prey.⁹

A field-recording need not be of 'nature' - animals, wildlife etc. - but often is. These kinds of sounds are exotic to city-sated ears, and sometimes a rather questionable exoticism has a part to play. Like the intrepid explorer, the field-recorder often goes out 'into the wild', employing the language of the hunter - 'on safari', 'capturing sound'. These terms are ironically transliterated to that most passive of occupations - listening - with subverted activist glee. The hunter brings back the prized game, unusual and from foreign parts, and transplants it from the wild and untamed 'jungle' to the domestic interior, where it can be displayed on the wall (via loudspeakers). And, quite understandably, field-recordings are often made away from home, when on a visit to a strange and compelling environment where strange new sounds accost the listener from every corner. Then the traveller returns, gets on line and tells stories.¹⁰ At the home page of the 'Phonography' group, Isaac Sterling provides an intelligent essay exploring what 'phonography' might mean, could mean, and might be becoming. Here is an extract from his thoughtful consideration:

The simple answer is that phonography (literally "sound-writing") refers to field-recording. ...Auditory events are selected, framed by duration and method of capture, and presented in a particular format and context, all of which distinguishes a recording from the original event during which it was captured. ...Some useful analogies can be made between phonography and photography. The majority of early photographs were intended to be documentary or forensic, and many field-recordings serve these same purposes. ...[but] a new generation of recordists has emerged, preoccupied with the abstract and formal dimensions of captured environmental sound.
(Isaac Sterling, www.phonography.org/whatis.html)

The beauty of the field-recording - of any documentary sound recording - is that this bounded slice of life can be yours, dear listener, to take home and enjoy in the comfort of your sitting room. You can make sense of it in your own way, and in your own time - and away from reality, without the distraction of mosquitoes or pungent smells. I find it a joyous thing that more and more pairs of ears are out there, not only listening and recording the world but also - and this is even more glorious - sharing the results through a simple, generous exchange of attractive or engaging

soundscapes. But, as Sterling's words indicate, there is a blurring of distinction between a documentary field-recording, and a recording that is subsequently composed in a response to the sound environment (however indirect that response may be). Sometimes the difference is hard to chart but, I think, a field-recording *per se* is not the best map from which to navigate through listening.

Although the field-recording appears to provide a perfectly-formed map of at least a small fragment of the world, of course it doesn't: it is an ambiguous representation, whose maker faces some of the same problems encountered by ethnographers of all kinds. Just by virtue of pressing 'record' when something interesting comes along, a choice has been made. Sound recordists, just as much as anthropologists, have to guard against their own deciding presence if they want an unmediated documentation of a time and place. But of course they can't, and quite often they don't want to. Many sound recordings are, indirectly or not, making a quiet point from behind the microphone. That point is that we should prick up our ears to the sonic environment, cease making noise for a moment, in order to fill the space it leaves with listening. But I also think that sometimes it is easy to get a little waylaid by the moral obligation we might feel towards our sounding world, and in particular towards the fragile beauty of the natural environment in sound. There is a difference between expressing what sound means or can indicate about the world outside, and expressing how listening feels, in terms of the inner world of self.

Perhaps you just cannot have it all. As allegorised by Borges, a map that fully-depicted a country on a 1-to-1 scale would be useless and obstructive, best abandoned to 'the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters'.¹¹ Such a ridiculously accurate representation of reality would reduce the cartographer to a functionary who, while noting every sensation faithfully, had failed to perceive a jot.

If by some quantum leap in technology I could secretly record the sounds outside your window and play them back to you simultaneously in real time, *exactly replacing* what's there, would you notice a difference? If there was no difference to perceive, then there would be no point in doing it – or rather, there would be no way of making a point through your listening. For, as Borges quietly asserts through the gentle suggestion of fable, the entirety of reality is impossible to chart; any belief that we might manage to do so misconstrues the power of the map. A mapmaker makes choices on what to leave in, what to draw attention to, and what to leave *out* – and why. (A street-map doesn't have room to show the lie of the land, a geological survey has little interest in indicating political divisions). In fact a good map is in some ways a poor representation that makes its viewpoint known through a filtering of information. This still leaves room for each individual cartographer to chart a multitude of different realities, whether they are physical, imagined or metaphorical.

Sometimes that filtering process occurs by virtue of the artefacts – sounds themselves can be gathered into collections that map out a period of time, or delineate a particular geography. Listening becomes a process of mapping connections, and reading the mapmaker's intent. But there has to be a difference between the map and the ground it covers.

Like home, but different

Here, listen now:

A motorised barge approaches, coming slowly towards you. The rumbling of a passing train emerges and then accompanies the boat engine, which continues its slow approach, gets louder, passes from left to right and then recedes – the sound departs just as slowly, taking its time; the boat continues to chunter away in the background, because it is still there. This is representation of a time.

I don't really need to describe this recording to you, because here it is – in your ears:

CD [11] 'Canalside atmosphere', recorded by Peter Cusack (track 6 of his CD)

Peter Cusack's sound recordings were collected in a small patch of North-east London called the Lea Valley, an area of un-gentrified marshland that survives alongside a canal, between a tatty mass of housing and a tangle of local railway lines. I know this place well because I used to live just down the road. But now you know it too. Maybe you could come to know those sounds far better than I can, because I am forever reminded of the actual sights that accompanied them whereas you are there, right now, listening. But actually, this is not a straightforward documentation, but a carefully structured listening adventure. Mostly that structure has been imposed at the time of recording, by the path of the microphone as it seeks out some sounds and encounters others. Occasionally the sounds are edited a little to bring them into relationship with another. The mix is subtle, and the effect is, I find, riveting. I never knew the place could sound like that (until I listened). However, it would be evasive, I think, to call this experience 'music'. And Cusack – in other guises a composer and performer of some renown – doesn't: he bills the CD as 'sound recordings', with himself as author. The difficulty (if only in finding a way to describe them) is that these sound recordings are more than archive documentation. They are a map, drawn by an expert listener.

A particular aspect of Cusack's mapping of the sound environment that I find interesting is the equivocal choice of duration. Many field-recordings of the environment are much longer than the average musical work: the world takes time to unfold, and perhaps a lengthier duration also allows time to forget time, and also to forget self. And this is surely why so many of the more execrable 'new age' ambient recordings are CD-length meanders through birds, waves or other unchallenging sonic surroundings. A more didactic approach goes to the other extreme, with sounds offered as neatly labelled 'exhibits'. For instance, a website for 'Listening to Nature – A Sound Walk across California'¹² lists indigenous birds and wildlife, with sketches (not photographs) of each, accompanied by a brief written description and a click and play environmental sound recording of the animal in question. Although the animals are no longer stuffed and arranged in glass cases, I fear they might as well be in terms of listening.

Cusack is somewhere in the middle. There are short recordings of bird cries and frogs chirruping, but they are just long enough to create a little window on their world. There are written descriptions of what made what sound, but these are brief notes that provide minimum information. And at the other extreme, even the longer recordings are – at around 2 minutes or so in duration – too short to become background ambience. You have to listen, you don't have time to zone out. In fact the locality is often mapped in quite an upfront, directed way. The CD as a whole is an engaging mix of environmental 'nature' recordings and oral history interviews with 'old-timers' who have worked on the canal and have anecdotes to tell. The careful choice of track order, the fragmentary liner notes, a few haunting photos to set

the scene, the inclusion of the sounds of people just getting on with life and sharing an amusing tale or two: all these surreptitiously invite you to pause a moment and listen while Cusack maps out his mappa mundi. Although there is virtually no processing or other sonic interference in these environmental recordings, there is definitely an authorial 'voice' behind the microphone which invites us to listen from another angle – even, on several occasions, underwater, from the earpoint of a frog. The experience of wonder from this simple, inhuman, inversion of the world is extraordinarily potent.

Cusack's recordings are a celebration of listening to what is there, in his community; an unexpected police encounter, motorised vehicles, rowing boats, rattling trains, joggers, dogs that bark annoyingly and even a nightingale recorded next to an electric power station (a superimposition offered by nature, not Cusack). The irony of encountering this rarely heard birdsong next to the mundane trilling of a transformer is offered without comment. All you need to do is listen.

A diversion from the normal route

[Bakerloo (brown), Piccadilly (dark blue), Metropolitan (pink), East London (orange), Jubilee (silver-grey), Northern (black), District (Green), Circle (yellow), Victoria (blue)]

Faster now, I'm on the move. The maps are different here. Train schedules measure out journeys in minutes taken rather than distance run, so there's very little to see. And underground – enclosed, and without a view from the window to distract attention – all territories are mapped in terms of personal space. Reality contracts, and so does time. I am squashed into a seat that, at this moment, is my personal micro-empire but, a mere 3 seconds later, will be occupied by another individual whose feelings are equally proprietary. There is barely time to smell the beery breath of my snoring neighbour, or to have my elbow nudged by someone's briefcase, before the doors slide open to reintegrate these passing sensations as part of a more extensive reality where I'm merely late for work. Outside, I catch my breath in the real world, and those individuals no longer exist. I am a face surrounded by a faceless crowd. Quick – onwards – alone into the rushhour.

Well-travelled routes, followed and re-followed with unthinking expertise, can engrave another map that leads from one recollected experience to another - indeed from one stage in life to another. And these odysseys of personal memory, perhaps we like to think, help to define us as individuals: they map our histories. So for me - as for thousands and thousands of other Londoners - the London Underground 'tube' map can trigger a one-person theatre of memory. As I sit on the train, gazing absentmindedly at the diagram representing one line or another, powerful associations colour every station with its own traveller's tale – no, *my* traveller's tale. The silvery-grey of the Jubilee line shimmers away to the distant reaches of Willesden, to buy semi-transparent manuscript paper printed from metal plates (themselves anachronistic maps of etched staves and clefs); in the same vein the Northern Line still snakes darkly and inexorably upwards to dreary oboe lessons in Highgate; the Victoria Line's optimistic bright blue belies the gloom of the ghastly bedsit in Finsbury Park; and South Kensington's yellow-green splice is, regardless of the time of year, a sunny school trip to the Natural History Museum, with cheese and tomato sandwiches eaten outside on the grass, and - from another time - a market stall festooned with strings of hippy beads.

Any novelist will tell you that half the trick is encouraging the reader to become the character but, really, I've gone too far. None of this wallowing is going to be of great interest to you unless I dress it up a bit more or universalise the 'feeling' in some way. Though we might sit down and exchange comparable memories, you can never share my precise feelings for Finchley Road. You may even be a bit embarrassed by my gauche revelations because a personal reminiscence is a self-indulgent map – best not for public use. But I'm enjoying the map reading process now, looking back (how often do you *listen* back?) over past times. Yet, even if all this remembering is fiction, you don't want to bother with reading my map unless there's something in it for you. And I think that this can also be a problem with both making and 'reading' works made from documentary sound: sometimes they intend to express how it feels, but end up expressing how it was. And these are not the same at all.

Despite the wealth of extraordinary sound environments in the world outside the window, it seems to me, especially from my experience of working with beginning composers, that many first experiments in working with recorded sounds are explorations of home. (I certainly include myself in this). Equipped with binaural headphones and a digital tape recorder, sound-gatherers are suddenly introduced to a heightened awareness of their own domestic habitat - and sometimes respond with the enthusiasm of explorers encountering an undiscovered country. Every little detail is fascinating and new, and worthy of collection. Fortunately the only real side effects of this particularly healthy altered state are recordings which contribute to pieces that often convey a palpable sense of astonishment at so much interesting sound going on, right before your ears. Kettles boiling, toilets flushing, water going down the plughole; alarm clocks, televisions and radios, computer keyboards; bacon sizzling, coke cans snapping (not to mention coke snorting, on one memorable occasion), footsteps, laughter, talking, phone calls, various bodily noises... ..all these and many more regularly feature in a litany of everyday listening brought into unexpected focus.

Frequently, I think, the piece is for the maker an extraordinarily evocative reminder of that listening 'astonishment' they felt. They not only wrote the map, but visited the country first. And any listener can sense and enjoy that with them to an extent. But for a map reader who comes along later in search of routes that lead further, astonishment is limited to this one particular path. I don't think that the astonishment at listening to ordinary sounds afresh necessarily wears off (I fervently hope it never will) but, in order to really develop a composed *listening* to the world, the self-directed voice of the audio diary needs to be subsumed within a more profound response.

Train of thought

CD [12] Pendlerdrøm ("Commuterdream"), by Barry Truax (excerpt)

Pendlerdrøm is a composition that explores metaphors of travel through explicit sound associations. At one level this piece paints a familiar scene. The sounds that open the piece are immediately recognizable to most of the western world as a generic soundscape from a bustling station environment, which is soon revealed more fully through the sounds of tannoy announcements, trains and various electronic beeps and signals. Although entirely invisible, this is definitely the real world.

Footsteps and human bustle (but not much distinct talking)
Voice announcements
Children's voices
Blowing a nose
Laughter
Electronic beeping – (lift, lift doors closing, rattling?)
Electronic chimes... then the sounds of people disembarking into another space
Sounds of trains arriving and departing
Squealing brakes
Pneumatic door opening, and air-brake hissing

I'll bet you knew 'em all. The daily train commute is one activity where the primacy of vision happily lapses for a while; the boredom of repetition provides time to listen. The commute can be done with eyes closed, and frequently is, since the time begrudgingly spent on travelling is a necessary practicality and there is no 'desire', no sense of discovery, no reasons to journey other than those of obligation and necessity. On the train we are passive, acquiescent and life (like sound) comes to us. We have relinquished control - hoping to arrive on schedule but knowing we can do nothing to ensure it. Perhaps our only desire is that, given a magic wand (or perhaps a lottery win), we too could click our heels and find ourselves back home in an instant. And this desire to evade the clock already leaves a chink open for listening to creep forward.

What Truax recognizes, of course, is that the 'idea' of commuting has little to do with which train you catch, or if you catch a train at all. Those familiar sounds are symbolic of a darker Kafkaesque nightmare of being unwillingly locked into habitual tedium, unable to escape from the eye of time, trapped in a greyness that has no variety but will, on the contrary, be identical for ever – day after day after day. In suggesting ways of re-perceiving a familiar sonic environment Truax – like many other composers of 'soundscape' work - is also suggesting a transfiguration of our normal response to the mundane. And this can be a means of escape. At two points in *Pendlerdrøm* the sounds of trains arriving and departing are moulded into lyrical drones, tuned to perceivable 'musical' pitches and time-stretched by Truax's trademark technique of granular synthesis. The harmonic choices are consonant, and the natural sonic contours of trains passing through the stations are perfect candidates for a slow reverie. During this brief encounter with listening, time stands still; and when time stands still all obligations disappear. You can be anywhere you want.

Pendlerdrøm (1997) (or "Commuterdream") is a soundscape composition that recreates a commuter's trip home from the Central Train Station in Copenhagen. At two points, one in the station and the other on the train, the commuter lapses into a daydream in which the sounds that were only half heard in the station return to reveal their musical qualities. It is hoped that the next day the commuter will hear the musicality of the station's soundscape in a different manner as a result of the dream; the rest of us may discover the very same aspects the second time we hear the work.
Barry Truax, from liner notes to CD 'Islands'

Pendlerdrøm is a little unusual for Truax, in that the sounds were provided for him by a Danish group, SKRAEP. And, similarly, many composers have made pieces from the source recordings collected by the various members of the World Soundscape Project. Possibly as a composer it helps when the sound environment you are processing is, even to you, slightly unfamiliar to start with. You are not an involved

participant in the original 'time' you are now dealing with as material. This provides a degree of distance that can facilitate abstraction.

But Truax's piece is, at root, a documentary work that invites a few moments of unexpected, musical reflection yet doesn't intend to stray too far from the real world – it wouldn't succeed if it did. This is a music that composes a narrative through listening, and where a way of listening provides a map to read. The absence of discovery, revelation and desire in the daily commute (in reality or as metaphor) is supplanted by the encouragement of discovery, revelation and desire in our listening response to sound. One map overlays the other.

Alternative transport

I once had a car embellished with 'go faster' stripes, giving it the appearance of a turbo-charged racer. It frequently broke down. I would have preferred stripes of the 'go further' variety. However, although I have no great attachment to cars of any kind, hearing the heavy sound of a car door clunking shut, at night, somewhere in the distance, evokes a certain feeling of nostalgia in me: well, I don't know why, and 'nostalgia' is the wrong word really. I can't quite place it on the map.

Maps require an imaginative comparison between two different territories, the one on the page, and the one outside the window. (Look, there's the turning, can't you see?). You need to make a connection between real and representation for map reading to serve its purpose. So there you sit with the road atlas open on your lap, torch wobbling in one hand, while the car bumps over the unmade track until your driver admits – finally - that you're irretrievably lost. Listening for clues doesn't help one iota, when all you can hear is a complaining engine and the hum of your buzzing thoughts. Stop the car and get out for a moment. Stand still. It's night time, and the summer air is full of whirring emanations. Close your eyes, and listen for the way it feels to hear the world. Listen differently from associating (or not associating) the object and the sound. Listen differently from dreaming back and forth between reality and its transformation. Listen – where are we? Unfold a new map of familiar territory and start again. The quality of the subjective feeling that accompanies our experience of smelling freshly ground coffee, or of stroking fur, or of being incredibly happy or sad, is impossible to map adequately in words. These types of un-chartable subjective experience – for which the philosophical term 'qualia' has been coined – are beyond articulation. We can't get near: I don't know what it feels like, for *you*, to be sad. But I do know that when we feel sad, we are each aware that it makes us feel a certain way. All we can share reliably is the knowledge that we feel it, and that we can somehow stand 'outside' the window of our sense of being, to *know* that we feel it.

The study of consciousness continues its intellectual struggle to pin down whether qualia are indeed a product of a separate, individual 'self' through which we amass and use perception of the world, or if the notion of consciousness as self is an illusory creation of the brain.¹³ I would not presume here to venture into the treacherous waters of philosophical discourse, where qualia occupy a subdivided field of thinking that goes well beyond any general use of the word. However, like author David Lodge, I would draw attention to the connections between the impossibility of articulating qualia, and literature's endeavours to 'simulate' them through a lyric use of metaphor and simile. Lodge quotes a passage from Anne Michael's *Fugitive Pieces*, which describes a street after a heavy snowfall. He draws attention to her

poetic imagery: ‘by describing each quale in terms of something else that is both similar and different – “a salt cave,” “a theatre of whiteness,” “like frozen waves” – the object and the experience of it are vividly simulated.’ (Lodge, 2002, p. 13)

Though all but useless at doing what words usually do, these strange conjunctions get some way towards describing the quale of ‘experiencing a response to new snowfall’ – without resorting to simple description, which would conjure up a picture but not a subjective experience. The confusion as to what language is ‘doing’ deflects our response towards an awakening of the *feeling* we have on seeing a street transfigured by pristine snow. Words go beyond themselves, and beyond describing any individual’s ‘real’ experience (fictionalised or otherwise). As Lodge comments, ‘the method of lyric poetry is... ..to use language in such a way that the description of qualia does not seem partial, imprecise, and only comprehensible when put in the context of the poet’s personal life.’ (Lodge, 2002, p. 11). This kind of poetic language short-circuits normal sense – and provides an opportunity to navigate towards a subjective experience. The reader does the navigating. I think that there is a way of composing sound that shares this kind of lyric juxtaposition, and allows the listener to navigate, through listening, towards their *own* feeling of reality in sound.

Here is an illustrative example:

CD [13] *Night Traffic*, by Paul Lansky (excerpt)

This 10-minute work maps a musical chart onto a real world sound. The sounds of traffic on a busy highway are tuned to bring out musical pitches, themselves extracted, by digital ‘comb-filtering’, from the inherent qualities of the recorded sound material. A dark, but strangely familiar soundscape ensues. But this is no composed to-ing and fro-ing between representation and reverie. Any travel is the listener’s intuitive choice. Musical processes and real-world sounds are fused in a conjunction that is not unlike the ‘salt cave’ simile that Lodge quotes above, which describes the feeling of experiencing new snow, but has nothing – on the face of it – to do with it at all. To speak of sonic abstraction is meaningless in this work by Lansky, because the subject of listening to *Night Traffic* is the *feeling* of listening itself.

The sonic abstraction of traditional musique concrète essentially inserts the *objet sonore* into an abstract musical discourse. Here listening for meaning is ‘reduced’ (Pierre Schaeffer’s term). Reduction is relative and so implies some kind of comparison. We are still map reading in the old, familiar way, keeping an eye on the real world outside the window, and trying to match things up. But I think that Lansky’s work is abstract, in a way that completely undermines intellectual priorities. This piece does not sound like a highway at night, but listening to it awakes that particular qualia - what listening to the highway *feels* like. How? The sounds of traffic appear recognizable – in contour, shape, pace. The representation of traffic is transparent. Similarly the musical framework is a clear ‘representation’ that is recognizable – pitches, rhythm etc. Neither of these would work alone; it is in their (literal) confusion that the lyric simile resides. An epic field-recording of untouched traffic sounds would be too literally a ‘picture’ of a sound. An abstract musical work that presented a slow, aimless voice-leading harmony would be a pleasant diversion. But the two together offer a mutual confusion.

And this apparently straightforward processing of traffic sounds has bugged me for years. I feel I am only just beginning to understand how to read my map of it.

It is not a descriptive piece at all. Because it starts as it is, and continues much the same, there are no explicit opportunities for flipping between listening to sounds and following memories or associations. The whole thing is a continuing ‘entity’ that carries on into the darkness – timeless and immutable. It does not go on with any place in mind. Listening to it is, essentially, simply beyond the trivialities of making associations with a source. Of *course* those are trucks and cars. The sounds become irrelevant: within a short time listening becomes a purely subjective response to the feelings such sounds evoke.

To be on your own

Another, last, subjective anecdote: at one time I frequented a tiny formal garden whose solitary stone bench proclaimed the biblical suggestion: ‘Come ye yourselves apart, into a quiet place, and rest awhile’¹⁴. In this one-person space, really little more than a couple of glorious azaleas and a miniature pond, I felt completely alone, even though the busy world outside was still perfectly visible a few steps beyond the wall. The world must have been audible too yet, strangely, I can’t remember hearing any sound at all.

Imagine that other kind of map, where there is no commitment to disembark at any one station. You can take any road you please. If you wish you can walk for a long while, or you can just sit still and travel. There is no direction home. Perhaps this map represents a territory that we long to chart on a 1-to-1 scale though, in reality, we know nothing about this imagined land. There are few everyday moments for the kind of reflection that proceeds from listening to a mapping of our inner spiritual universe. Maybe you can take away the view. There might be advantages to a more passive reading of the world. In any case, perhaps a tentative simulacrum is the most we should hope to create from the depths of our Platonic cave. But I do not think that the kind of mapping that transcends ordinary landscapes comes, necessarily, from an acquiescent listening response to the world. As Robert Louis Stevenson once cloyingly remarked, ‘the world is so full of a number of things’; but although a full and boundless experience of listening to the world is one thing, there is a benefit in the bone-clean purity of emptiness, where nothing is known. Perhaps there you can listen to sounds that are white as azaleas and as pure as water in a shimmering pond. But take away even these similes and comparisons (throw away the maps) and then you really know nothing. And that’s different again.

...the function of negative knowledge is not unlike the uses of space – the empty page upon which words can be written, the empty jar into which liquid can be poured, the empty window through which light can be admitted, and the empty pipe through which water can flow. Obviously the value of emptiness lies in the movements it permits or in the substance which it mediates and contains. (Watts, 1962, p.57)

CD [14] – *untitled #90*, by Francisco Lopez (excerpt)

I don’t know what any of these sounds are. And I don’t know what I mean by that – what are they ‘of’, ‘for’, ‘about’, ‘doing’? Behind a screen of processing there are glimpses of – I think, for a while – waves breaking, insects calling, birds singing. For a few minutes I am straining my ears to hear connections. I can’t hear them. I can’t use them. But there is this loud, insistent, high-pitched tone – not superimposed, but

part of it – whatever ‘it’ is – that blasts through like... ..no, no *similes* please. It is not a sound to identify, or to care to identify. This sound is at such a high pitch (literally and in terms of volume and intensity) that I cannot do anything but be aware that it is something I do not ‘know’. This sound is a singular, ‘thing’ of a sound, but other than that it is unknown. And it goes on for a long while - over 40 minutes in fact - thought measuring time is impossible here – shifting gear a miniscule amount here and there, working towards every crevice of listening and pushing tentacles into perception. This unyielding experience transfixes a moment of listening that goes on for ever, and instead of changing, becomes more and more profound. And there was really no point in writing all that down because for you it will have been different. ‘It’ is my listening. This is a walk without a map. This is listening with eyes closed.

The answer to so many of the questions we usually throw at sound is, in relation to this listening experience, ‘I don’t know’. Really that answer is echo-ed by another – ‘I don’t remember’. Usually the ‘I’ that listens puts tangible substance to the experience, by remembering objects or states of mind, or how some thing (not necessarily identifiable) feels. All this bringing back to mind is a way of following the subjective map that listening makes. In this piece by Lopez, perhaps there is nothing to remember at all because the material that makes this piece is empty of associations and full of substance. So it is not ‘the sounds of the real world’ but *sound* that fills a space with listening.

After the sound has finished it is not a matter of remembering how it felt to listen to it, or indeed if there was anything to hear. *Untitled #90* ceases, and the gaping space of emptiness it vacates is reclaimed almost immediately by the sounds of the real world rushing back in, like pent-up water released into a channel (full of *similes*), weaving back through the old paths. Listening is already starting to fill up again. This cascade of returning comprehension is wonderful in itself, but the real achievement was to take us away from our self for a while. Any map we might draw to make sense of *untitled 90* would have to be a map devoid of any orientation, lacking all landmarks and bare of any detailed real-world representation. It is not that the real-world is banished by this work – how can it be, you can still hear it over the wall – but those brief flutters of vaguely recognizable real-world sound are such a long, long way away.

I’m fighting against a dissipation of pure sound content into conceptual and referential elements. My music doesn’t have a meaning in the traditional sense, there is no message and no intention of communication or expression. I’m trying to reach a transcendental level of profound listening that enforces the crude possibilities of the sound matter by itself; in particular, the openness, the richness of this matter and all the subjective, individual universes that can arise from this kind of listening. (Francisco Lopez in interview with Feardrop (France), May 2000 – at www.franciscolopez.net)

Lopez’s stated intent does not, on the face of it, concur with some of the other approaches I have mapped out here. But on my map they are all distinct landmarks on related paths. Once place can lead to another. Every single cartographer who transforms the sounds of the known environment is charting a route towards listening differently. Every map has its own priorities, but every map reader chooses their own route.

We might chart a world of listening. But as someone once said to me (and I’m sure you’ve met this audience member in one guise or another) ‘do you really call that stuff you’re doing ‘music’?’. Well, of course, that depends on how you listen. Here’s my suggestion: do not subscribe blindly to schools of thought; follow your ears and intuition. But don’t confuse this with lack of rigour. The charts we draw, read and

follow through attention to both our own and others' listening relationship to the world can be dynamic and flexible, and can accommodate various shifts of orientation. But they are not an abdication from making music, since they still require thought, commitment – and active intent. Making music from listening, through the medium of recorded sound, is a composed listening that takes some work from both mapmaker and map reader. It helps to have directions of some kind, if you want to go further than halfway there and back again.

So pack a bag, and don't forget: bring your own map.

¹ Ryokan (1758-1831) trans R. H. Blyth (in the four volume book *Haiku*, Hokuseido, Tokyo, 1948)

² There are, of course, maps of non-visual territories and concepts: soundings of sea depths, DNA, maps of history, ideas, political divisions, but these abstractions are translated into visual terms, they are not there on the ground. Those maps – such as radar – that are made through non-visual soundings still result in visual objects while non-visual maps are still a process of envisaging. When I imagine my vegetable plot the taste of each thing planted there might come to my mind – but I also see the ragged rows of leeks and potatoes (and weeds) in my mind's eye.

³ The map is housed in Hereford cathedral, England.

⁴ For an example see Appendix 1 'Sample Sound Notation Systems' in R. Murray Schafer's classic text, *The soundscape: our sonic environment and the tuning of the world* (see Bibliography)

⁵ *The Vancouver Soundscape 1973 / Soundscape Vancouver 1996*, Cambridge Street Records CSR-2CD (1996).

⁶ 'The Vancouver Soundscape', track 15 on CD 2.

⁷ 'There are particular hotspots where declines are greatest. In London there was a 59% decline in House Sparrow numbers between 1994 and 2000.' From the British Trust for Ornithology (<http://www.bto.org/notice/housesparrows.htm>) where more precise statistics can be found.

⁸ For further information on the many and varied preoccupations of sound, or acoustic ecology, I recommend a visit to the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, at <http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/wfae/home/index.html> (URL visited December 2002).

⁹ The sparrowhawk was almost killed off in Britain in the 1960s by the use of DDT pesticides in crop-spraying, subsequently banned once their effect on the environment became clear. Perhaps sparrows just had it lucky for a few years. Further information on the effect this may have had on the sparrow population see the Songbird Survival page at <http://www.songbird-survival.org.uk/fact2.htm> (URL visited January 2003)

¹⁰ Witness this excerpt from an online article, 'What is an aural safari?' by Chris DeLaurenti, posted at the web site of a Phonography group - <http://www.phonography.org/safari.htm> (URL visited January 2003):

‘I emerge from an alley onto a brightly lit plaza. I am the only white person there. Despite scattered fights and squabbles, the police are nowhere to be seen. I roll tape and stride forward, snatching fragments of combat and conversation. A cuddling couple ambles by and smiles. Someone amidst an imposing throng asks me what I'm doing. I'm too distracted, too cautious to say more than "collecting sounds." He wishes me luck. A line of mounted police forms down the street. Anticipating the polyphony of hoof beats on cobblestones, I hurry to the horses. My hunt continues. I am on aural safari’. Tongue in cheek it may be, but there is a rather suspicious overt enjoyment in the chase from this would-be aural Indiana Jones.

¹¹ ‘On Exactitude in Science’

‘...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.’

From Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley. London: Penguin 1999.

¹² <http://www.museumca.org/naturalsounds/> (URL visited January 2002).

¹³ I loosely paraphrase here from David Lodge's preamble, in his essay "Consciousness and the Novel", in the collection of the same name (see bibliography). For a more technical explanation of the notion of 'qualia', and the technicalities of its meaning in philosophical terms I recommend the online entry by Michael Tye, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: Tye, Michael; "Qualia", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 1997 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL =

<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win1997/entries/qualia/>

¹⁴ New Testament: Mark Chapter 6, verse 31.