

Schizophonia vs. l'objet sonore: soundscapes and artistic freedom

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"The dissipation of music"

The concept of soundscape has been developing over the last twenty years. Speaking more properly, it has been the term, rather than the concept, since "soundscape" embraces not only different types of works and aural systems but also antagonistic conceptions of the relationships between art and life. Leaving aside purely instrumental creations that are presented under this term, it usually refers to a concern with real sound environments. It is precisely the definition of this concern what makes the difference between the different conceptions of soundscape.

"The tuning of the world" (1) by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, first published in 1977, is considered by many as a "bible" on soundscapes. It presents a thorough revision of many issues and ideas with regard to the situation of the real sound environments in our present world, as well as a very clear aesthetical and philosophical position in relation to the assessment of this situation, including suggestions on what should be done. This position has defined the basic guidelines of though of a whole school of what could be called as "Schaferians", gravitating around the label of acoustic ecology (first within the frame of the World Soundscape Project in the 70s and more recently through the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology in the 90s).

I think that the essence of Schaferian propositions can be synthesized -through my personal criticism- in two deeply related points:

(i) The "tuning" is basically a "silencing", as if "noisy" were an evil condition in itself and also an exclusive feature of post-industrial human-influenced world (the latter being something in which I think even Russolo was wrong). A good recent example of this perspective is the "Manifesto for a better environment" of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music (2), for which I could propose the more fitted title of "Manifesto against loud sound environments". In the case of Schafer, this supposed evil condition of certain noises or noise environments is tried to be justified by untenable relational assertions, as puerile and amazing as, for example, that "the drone in music... is an anti-intellectual narcotic" or (speaking about motor sounds) "despite the intensity of their voices, the messages they speak are repetitive and ultimately boring" (3). The problem is that health or communication aspects are merged and confounded with aesthetic judgement. Besides this, many natural sound environments are quite noisy (waterfalls, seashores, certain tropical jungles...) and the sonic steady-state condition is a very common feature in nature (regardless of the noisy or quiet character of the environment). For northern people as Mr. Schafer or the Board of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music, many Mediterranean or African towns must probably be unbearably noisy, but the conceptions on sound environments are not uniform and noise abatement, per se, could also be bad. More importantly, it is a misleading, simplistic view for our understanding and appreciation of soundscapes.

(ii) The schizophonia as a negation of (or at least an opposition to) the possibility of isolating sound properties from an environment and using them -by themselves alone- for any human endeavour, such as artistic creation. The idea of sound object (objet sonore) developed by Pierre Schaeffer (4) summarizes the main achievement of musique concrete: the conception of a recorded sound as something with own entity by itself, independent of its source, which has only been physically possible since the technical development of electromechanical means of fixation and reproduction of sound. As brilliantly highlighted by Michel Chion (5), is this, and not the use of sounds from the environment, what defines the idea of "concrete". For Schafer, this separation of the sound from its source -which he calls schizophonia- is an aberrational effect of this twentieth-century development. Therefore, schizophonia and objet sonore are antagonistic conceptions of the same fact.

Recently, this confrontation between Schaferian and Schaefferian views, which I am trying to make explicit here, has been more specific regarding the question of musical creation. Thus, Darren Copeland (6) heavily criticized the modern defense of musique concrete in Chion's "Art des sons fixes" (5) since he thinks that the electro-acoustic abstractionism caused by the source-sound split closes doors on the worlds located within the experiential world. Similarly, Barry Truax (7) questioned also this split, stating that the soundscape composition is characterized most importantly by its refusal to separate sound entirely from its source and context, and also that its ultimate goal is the re-integration of the listener with the environment in a balanced ecological relationship.

I will be concise and clearly Schaefferian here. I am professor of Ecology and I have been recording and composing with sound environments since more than fifteen years ago. Although I am quite aware of the obvious relationships between all the properties of a real environment, I think is an essential feature of the human condition to artistically deal with any aspect(s) of this reality. I believe that what is under question here is the extent of artistic freedom with regards to other aspects of our understanding of reality. There can only be a documentary or communicative reason to keep the cause-object relationship in the work with soundscapes, never an artistic / musical one. Actually, I am convinced that the more this relationship is kept, the less musical the work will be (which is rooted in my belief that the idea of absolute music and that of objet sonore are among the most relevant and revolutionary developments in the history of music). The "abstractionism" of the art des sons fixes is precisely a "musicalization" and -somewhat paradoxically in this comparison- right the contrary to the abstraction in music, i.e., a concretization. It can obviously close doors in the experiential description of sounds and their sources, but it opens new doors of artistic creation; to me, the latter are much more essential and relevant to the human condition than the former. A musical composition (no matter whether based on soundscapes or not) must be a free action in the sense of not having to refuse any extraction of elements from reality and also in the sense of having the full right to be self-referential, not being subjected to a pragmatic goal such as a supposed, unjustified re-integration of the listener with the environment.

I think it is very useful for this discussion to compare this situation with that of visual creation, in which the freedom to deal with similar separations of elements of reality is not only evident and widespread but also artistically developed far beyond than it is in music. What would be an equivalent critique to what, for example, Van Gogh did with the landscapes he saw? Schaferians: please, let us Schaefferians to have the freedom of a painter.

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Cited literature

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