Sound Object? Sound Event! Ideologies of Sound and the Biopolitics of Music

By Agostino Di Scipio

Abstract

This article elaborates on the ideology of the *sound object*, as a predominant factor in common attitudes of sound-making and listening, and contrasts it with an understanding of sound as the *event* of time-specific and space-specific traces left by desired or necessary interactions. The discussion is described as one bearing on the *biopolitics of music*: by weaving together an ecological awareness of sound and a critical (and creative) view of music technologies, the article emphasizes the relationship between the material conditions and the cognitive mechanisms of auditory experience *qua* "conditions of existence" of purposeful sound-making in general. Commitments of the kind can take the form of scholarly research and/or of artistic explorations. Therefore the discussion touches both on broader questions of musical knowledge in their relation to issues in audio media theory, and on particular examples of sound art practices where reconsidered notions of *aura* seem to emerge.

Introduction (sketches for the biopolitics of music)

Some awareness of sound phenomena is proper to all cultures. Different ways of becoming aware of sound enact different meanings of music and other acoustic communications. The manner in which sound is brought about and is born to perception, made present to us and kept in existence (however temporarily), is part of the meaning of music (including music not made of sounds) across different historical and geo-cultural coordinates. Music emerges, to a large extent, from a care for manners of making sound and of making silence. I mean, not only ways of making sound present to us, but also ways of making ourselves present to sound. How we relate to sound affects the life of music and affects what music makes of our own life.

Cultural ideologies – i.e. the cultural constructs and metaphors captured as cognitive and perceptual attitudes of human beings in their making-sense of the world – underpin music by structuring in the first place the process of auditory experience. In turn, they are shaped, reinforced or countered, by lived auditory experience. There is a double bind, a stable coupling between the two: one is born by the other. The domain thus defined – how musical practices emerge from a participated understanding of sound, as the latter emerges from former – is the domain investigated by what I call, maybe too ambitiously, the "biopolitics of music".[1] With that I mean an inquiry concerning the material conditions and the cognitive mechanisms of auditory experience *qua* "conditions of existence" of music and purposeful sound-making in general. A commitment of the kind, can take the form of scholarly research and/or of artistic exploration.

> *How we relate to sound affects the life of music and affects what music makes of our own life.*

We live in a historical age when human technology is no more just a "prosthesis" (an extension of the organism, as in earlier 20th media theory, *à la* McLuhan), and has become instead a thorough, maybe complete framing to human life (Heidegger 1977). Technologies shape the environment we live in, often in the form of intersecting networks that mediate relations among human beings, and between human and non-human beings: they implement established knowledge and thus inscribe power relations not just into our "tools," but into our life environment. Technology is a "theatre of hermeneutic exchange" where the meanings of human life are negotiated (Feenberg 1995). In such a context, the battle for an acceptable degree of freedom in action – or just for a certain *margin of manouvre* – is prerequisite to a desired freedom in expression. An effort to at least appropriate the tools and means of one's own action seems proper to all artistic practices across the epochs and the continents, and it is a most relevant one in the present time (Di Scipio 1998).

In the following, I'd like to discuss aspects of what I see as a predominant ideology of sound and a determinant factor in predominant attitudes of listening. I elaborate on issues that are nothing new to many of us, in an attempt at weaving together a much necessary ecological awareness and an equally necessary critical (and creative) approach on the technologies and cultural ideologies we live with. In a time of globalization and pancapitalism, musical media and sound technologies are themselves captured in a globalized economy of profit, whose long-term effects involve an impoverishment and an annihilation of the experiential contents of music. By appropriating ways of sound-making and deconstructing the ideological contents of auditory experience, a more comprehensive strategy is hopefully enacted, that may possibly let music exist not (only and exclusively) as a merchandise and a commodity of the worldwide entertainment industry.

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Knowledge (perception of the environment)

It is often said that musical activities imply the development of particular skills and cognitive templates. Sometimes we simply say that music is a "form of knowledge". I prefer to rephrase that: creative sound-making and listening involve grains of human understanding and sensibility that are unique in the broader social context, and that contribute to the shared, social potential in their own peculiar way. I mean a special sense, such as for the passing of time, for the dynamics of the surrounding space, for the coordination with other human beings, for a balanced relationship of the body to instruments or tools. These (and others) sensibilities define a range of competences and abilities in being-in-the-world and making-sense of it, that is not accessible in the very same fashion across other human endeavours. I am not talking so much of specific skills and competences that define a music knowledge as a *knowledge of music*, I am rather talking of a *musical way of knowing* as a declination of becoming-

Figures 1 & 2 – *Modes of Interfence* n.3. Agostino Di Scipio's installation, University Paris 8, Symposium *Music and ecologies of sound* and *Journées d'Informatique Musicale*, May 2013.

aware in sound, as a mode of perception of the environment that potentially belongs to everybody, not only to specially gifted people or trained professionals and amateurs. "Music is the vehicle through which we explore our auditory structural coupling to the […] world" (Dunn 2007, 14). In that exploration, we find today the world densely filled up with technological layers of different sorts, constituting the very infrastructure or our life environment: in my view, the kind of ecological awareness so distinctive of creative sound-making practices, should be viewed to also concern this overly technologized environment, parts of which play in fact a decisive (limiting and/or liberating) role in those very practices (including practices presumed to have nothing to do with technology).

Deconstructing given perceptual habits, and then opening such operation to positive, constructive statements, has often (always?) been a crucial moment in artistically fertile behaviours. Scholarly and artistic efforts showing that kind of commitment are relevant in a "biopolitics" of music that builds on an ecological awareness of sound; addressing the cultural and material conditions set to the understanding and the experience of sound means addressing ourselves to the conditions set for music to exist and function, in individual and social life, as a way of knowing.

Sound object

We live today in and with an ideology of sound and music that reduces the cognition of sound to that of a *sound object*. Well-known reasons exist for that, following historical developments and the electronic media revolution of the 20th century. The early advent of sound recording later branched into multiple instances of *audio* culture, and sound became increasingly described and perceived as some kind of hard thing before us, separate from us (*Gegenstand*) and ready-at-hand. We can handle it and cause no modifications in it. We can displace it and leave it "as is", functional to designs probably quite independent of it. That essentially describes an approach entirely flattened on an audio engineering view. But that technical goal has the character of a "limit": it can never be actually achieved, except with a coordinate transformation of our cognitive inclinations. It is necessary to learn perceiving sound as *object*. In the 1950s, Pierre Schaeffer (Schaeffer 1966) needed *écoute réduite* (reduced listening) to isolate sound "in itself" from source and context, turning it into *objet sonore* – a separate, thing-like entity that one can address "as such".[2]

There is no question that sound recording technologies, of course, paved the way to important musical developments, and that, in turn, some musical developments determined the necessity to embrace sound recording and electronics. To be clear, I am deeply familiar with, and respectful of, the several forms of electronic and electroacoustic music. I have been personally involved for many years in electroacoustic and digital audio technologies, as a composer and researcher. As we all know, in his famous 1936 essay, Walter Benjamin postulated a positive, liberating potential in the arts based on the modern technologies of "mechanical reproduction", especially because, in his view, they would undermine the character of *aura* peculiar to past forms of art and the elitarian styles of fruition that connoted them (Benjamin 2008). In later decades, experimental music of different sorts appropriated the electronic means of reproduction and turned them into new means of production.

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Today digitally reproduced sound is ubiquitous and pervasive, and has since long become a heavily conditioning element of our auditory faculties. The sound object results from a technological recontextualization that moves auditory perception into a logics of separation – Schafer's *schizophonia*. The sound object shapes (and is shaped by) cognitive modalities that lead us to experience sound as something that can be handled, moved in time and space, stored, exchanged, independent of the ephemeral temporal and spatial contingencies of its coming into presence. That reframes the ecological functionalities that auditory perception can perform, thus reframing the ecology of music too.

That *reductio ad objectum* also opens the possibility to capture sound and music in an economy of "exchange of equivalent goods", turning them into materials worked out in a large-scale industrial apparatus of "cultural productions". An objectifying cognitive attitude thus leaves way to a reification of the sound phenomenon (sound turned into a commodity, trapped into a market economy). In turn, of course, that reification reinforces the cognitive attitude that makes it possible. Such a dynamics wipes out a very different economy that sound may otherwise capture and lend itself to: as a medium of participation *in* and *with* the environment (see next section), sound can be said to be indeed pre-inscribed in an economy of gift and sharing, more precisely in an economy of *interested* gift – sound performs *the inflation of a promise of inclusion* (Di Scipio 2013). An inclusive politics is cancelled by an ideology of the sound object.

The increasingly easier access to musical commodities (portable players, internet streaming, etc.) reinforces a way to deal with sound as something one can handle and dispose of *at will*. That instills in consumers a sense of empowerment, of being-in-control. However, that comes with a paradoxical side-effect, as with a subjective dependency on the "empowering" media (a sense of "being-in-control" masks a more fundamental "being-controlled"). Furthermore, the extreme availability of recorded music is a notorious cause of "pollution from sound". Pouring out of too many speakers and blasters surrounding us, sound and music become an invasive pollutant. One may enjoy a sense of being-in-control, but may also be distressed by a sense of not being in power to cut short with the surrounding mess. As it seems, today it has become possible to think of "sound" and "music" as something that exists in a way that it had never before: as waste and pollutant. The opposite of a medium or vehicle of ecological awareness.

In its manner of working, the sound object turns off the relational and contextual meaning inherent to a musical way of knowing. It prevents a becoming-aware of sound as the fragile trace of agencies belonging to the actual place and time. Saying that the sound object has an *ideological* status amounts to saying that it is born of determined cultural conditions and particular cognitive modalities: Foucault would call it a *dispositif*, a device of subjectivity, a cultural institution: it implements a historically-determined representation, and makes things work accordingly across the society. As a *dispositif*, the sound object can and should be deconstructed. The difficulty is in the double bind: artefacts (re)produce and stabilize the ideology they are born of.

All human sound-making manifests itself as audible traces of desired or necessary interactions in space and time.

Sound event

As a phenomenon of human experience, sound is never really *object* and is always *event*.[3] We can always attend to it as the audible manifestation of relations and interactions in the space-time unity of experience, in the here-and-now. A non-objectifying attitude is at work here, sensitive to the ecology of the living and embodied process that auditory perception is. This is in fact something the body knows well, but that *we* have unlearned: sound is difficult to objectify (electronically generated sound is no exception). Sensed in its unfolding in time across the tridimensional space, sound spreads around and within the listening body, as well as across and within the body of the sound source. As it takes place (and that takes time), it also takes on the semantic connotations of the place, as an event *in* and *of* the environment. That happens before well-implanted mental habits may frame it in a logics of separation and objectification (Di Scipio 2011).

Sound events have both an energetic, vibrational status – energy transferring across bodies and through a medium (the medium is just another body) – and an informational status, bearing the audible traces of all interactions (material and cultural) they are born of; they take up all signs of the mediations they go through before reaching the ear.[4] In sound, everything is connected to every other thing and "everything interacts with everything else" (Truax 1984, xii). Every surface, every obstacle in the space affects to some smaller or larger extent the sound that arrives to the tympanum. The body to which the ear belongs, and the ear itself, leaves traces in sound. All technical mediations, all means of channelling sound, however transparent they can be presumed to be, leave their audible traces: the ear can detect the mediations – one could say, the ear can deconstruct the audio media. Technological mediations have a voice. They don't just re-present sound as such.[5] Indeed, "there is no sound *as such*" (Di Scipio 2011, 105).

Consider a meaningful paradox. Acousmatic music, made of sound objects and often exhibiting an illusionistic poetics of the virtual, is sometimes played in concert rooms equipped with hyper-professional multichannel equipment (*acousmonia*), in order to elicit bodily responses that would be out of question with more usual equipment (extremely low frequencies, physical sources positioned at different distances, virtual sources coming from different routes, etc.). There we touch on an issue too often relegated to talks of virtual reality, namely: *immersion* – a concept that deserves careful reconsideration in ecologically more sound terms. The politics of the sound object becomes evident in immersive sound diffusion: a sense of being drowned in sound is experienced via a technology of power (loudness, larger-than-real spaces), as if sound, if not boosted-up, were not a medium we are immersed in, as if the feeblest breath were not something that is attended to with the full body and that can fill the ear (e.g. when hugging tight to your partner).

All human sound-making manifests itself as audible traces of desired or necessary interactions in space and time. Addressing ourselves to the sound event means having a sense for the relational medium that sound is and in which we live ("we don't hear sound – we hear *in* sound", Ingold 2011, 138). It means listening for the interactions and relationships that are revealed as timbral and spatial nuances in auditory perception.[6] The sound event tells us of the physical and social interactions of which it is composed. It tells us of our own relationship to what we hear in sound, and of our own relation to the surrounding environment. Attending to the sound event, what takes place is a politics of presence, proximity and relationship. There the performance of music can do its job: turning a space or site (neutral connotation) into a place or home (value-laden connotation), temporarily at least.

Detour (on soundcape)

Soundscape composition, as a cultural practice rooted in acoustic ecology (Schafer 1977), approaches sound as not separate from environment, or, more generally, as not separate from context. However, soundscape composition seems to lend itself to a strategy of separation and objectification when playing-back, in adequately equipped concert rooms, sound recorded in places foreign to the particular room – note the pungent criticism in Dunn (1999). When no specific attention is paid to the very operation of decontextualization, or when "spatialization" technologies and multichannel diffusion are exploited to offer a virtual rendering of the recorded soundscape, the proposal can be taken as a documentation of and a commentary on private experiences of particular soundscapes, but remains in a logics of separation and representation. All acousmatics fundamentally implies that logics, mirroring Schaeffer's path towards the *objet sonore* – and his problematic claims for a *phenomenology* approach (Solomos 1999, Kane 2007). The additional risk for soundscape composition, facilitated by affordable and portable field-recording equipment, is that of slipping into a kind of *sonic tourism*.

A younger generation of practitioners (i.e., Lopez 1997) can't accept the implicit value judgment against noise, and a sort of nostalgia for a quieter world, that they see inherent in Schafer (1977). After so many years, probably that nostalgic and romantic tilt appears only relatively problematic. I do think, however, that the whole question of noise – as a broader cultural issue and as a phenomenon of lived auditory experience – needs to be rearticulated in light of so many artistic and scholarly approaches having meanwhile emerged. Both "noise" and "silence" are biopolitically relevant issues, that is, issues which matter as far as the conditions of existence of music are concerned.[7] In this view, it is also interesting to ponder the differently nuanced critiques recently raised concerning the notion itself of "soundscape" (Ingold 2007, Kelman 2010, Montgomery 2009, Helmreich 2010).[8] These authors acknowledge the breakthrough that soundscape studies represented, but their critical views can be taken as contributions allowing us to go further into the inquiry concerning the relationship of human, sound, and the environment.

How should we understand that "sound recording is an extension of ephemerality, not its undoing?" (Sterne 2009)

Performance practices (reproduction, documentation, aura)

Creative practices bearing on sound as event hardly translate into technically reproducible artefacts. In their perspective, ways of presenting and ways of presencing are more important than ways of representing. Some sound installation art (since Max Neuhaus and Bill Fontana, in the 1960s and 1970s, to more recent approaches) can be either attended or documented; it is not meant to be reproducible and just cannot be reproduced (multichannel audio and field-recording do not really help). Same for "deep ecology" practices, of course, like sound walks and performances in the open, among other examples. Same applies for some of John Cage's most seminal works, and for current live-electronics approaches bearing on an ecosystemic view of the sonic relationship between performers, equipment, and space (Waters 2007, Di Scipio 2003 and 2011). In this regard, we should also think of the work of Alvin Lucier, Nicolas Collins and several younger artists (Waters 2011). We can think of instances of "radical improvisation" from collectives like Nuova Consonanza, or AMM, in the 1960s, to current approaches bordering with "noise-music" (Mattin-Iles 2009).

Consider instrumental music made of very thick sound masses, maybe with sound sources dispersed in unusual ways across the concert venue (e.g. Iannis Xenakis's orchestra piece *Terretekthor*). Consider sound art presenting us with very sparse, feeble, almost inaudible sounds (e.g. many works by Rolf Julius). These, too, are practices whose meaning gets largely lost in reproduction. Historical landmarks like the *Poéme Èlectronique* (LeCorbusier-Varése) or the Xenakis's *Polytopes*, with their overlap of multichannel sound, architecture, and images or light, are obvious examples of works that cannot exist as recordings: they can survive their time-specific manifestation only in materials and media *documenting* the work (whatever that means). Or they should, in principle, be made again from scratch, made "original" anew.

Consider works consisting in the formation of small communities, or in sound actions collectively pursued by visitors. The French composer Pascale Criton has illustrated, in her presentation [at the Paris conference], works of the kind. Sound can be "a device to elaborate social connections" (LaBelle 2010). It may be suggestive to think of such endeavours as instances of *relational* aesthetics (Bourriaud 1998).

In short, and regardless of aesthetic directions, several artistic endeavors seem to materialize in performative circumstances inseparable from the space-time unity of their lived experience. Are we then in the presence of artistic practices that defy Benjamin's canon of "art in the age of its mechanical reproduction"? That is surely a problematic statement to propose. In a way, yes, we are (and have been for decades). But several questions should be tackled in order to let the statement lay on solid ground. That is not our task here. In approaching the conclusion, however, we can at least consider some observations maybe of use in further work.

Are we still to consider the Benjamin's dictum (from 1936) as *the* paradigm for all electronic arts, and for the sound arts in particular, as most authors and commentators continue to propose to this day? Are we to take up again notions of *aura*? Certain scholars have addressed the question of aura in the light of recent artistic endeavours (Rüth 2008, Mersch 2002). Others propose an "aesthetics of atmosphere", partly following from a confrontation with Benjamin's aura (Böhme 1993, 116–118). A recent paper (Distaso 2013) notes that Adorno seemed to envision a new kind of musical aura (in passages of his 1963 paper on radiophonic art). Bruno Latour has elaborated a notion of "second-order aura" (my rephrasing) in connection to ultra-refined digital renderings of old paintings (Latour-Lowe 2011). What is interesting, in such contributions, is not so much the (im)possible return to an art of auratic character (that would be a nostalgic move, given the profoundly different historical context), but the chance to address and understand aura in a new perspective. Paraphrasing Adorno, just as the artistic *materials* are historically determined, so are the *immaterial* characters of art.

Also, questions arise concerning the idea that practices bearing on context-specific sound making can (or should) be *documented*, as already mentioned. Documentation works with reproduction, but is not the same as reproduction. Are we to consider *documentality* (Ferraris 2008) as a distinct dimension of our intimate and shared relationship to sound? What do we need documents for, exactly, as far as auditory experience is concerned? How should we understand that "sound recording is an extension of ephemerality, not its undoing?" (Sterne 2009). Some artists intentionally plan their site-specific actions in order to document them. In such cases, shall we say that the role of documentation shifts from that of a "means" to that of an "end"? Can we speak of aura in relation to ephemeral works deliberately designed to be documented?

It is maybe not by chance that these final interrogatives bring us to questions of time (duration, durability, ephemerality, eventuality). Maybe that is because, based on a necessary ecological awareness, questions of time could now be taken up again, in their intimate solidarity with space and the environment.

Endnotes

1. While the notion of "biopolitics" comes from the work of Michel Foucault, the way I (ab)use it here owes more to Agamben (1995) and Hardt-Negri (2009).
2. An interesting commentary on Schaffer's *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966) bears the title "L'objet sonore, ou l'environnement suspendu" (Augoyard 1999).
3. "Event" may not be the best term, given the common abuse of it, and given the philosophical overload and the mystical resonances it might evoke. However, I am not alone in using it – see Mersch (2002), where the context is the aesthetics of performative arts, and see O'Callaghan (2009), where the context is the history of philosophical ideas. Clearly, I imply no shared notion of "sound as event" among these contributions.
4. The term "information" should not be understood as something that *is in* or *belongs to* the environment, as something that human beings *pick up* from the external world. I cannot elaborate on this point; I will simply drop a concise quote from Heinz von Foerster, who described information in a constructivist vein, as "inferences" humans build based on sensory data: "the environment contains no information; the environment is as it is" (von Foerster 1972, 6). The view has been further elaborated in more recent research directions (biology of cognition, phenomenology of living systems, etc.).
5. In his *acoustic epistemology* (or *acoustemology*), ethnologist Steven Feld investigates the "place of sound, and the sound of place" (Feld 2010, 36) in peoples where a direct relation exists between the sound of the inhabited environment and the structure of society. In such circumstances, the difficulties in recording and documenting the sound-making social activities is not at all marginal. For Tomas (1996), in Feld's recording sessions the equipment itself tends "to make disappear what it would preserve" and thus hiddenly resurrects "a history of colonial relations" (Tomas 1996, 121). The objection is interesting as it refers less to limitations in the sound recording technology, and more to intercultural issues.
6. A more systemic notion of "timbre" is required today. Research in that direction could benefit from work in ecological psychoacoustics, where the perception of "space" is often a crucial topic (e.g. Neuhoff 2004), as well as from a merging of *physical modelling* (digital signal processing models of sound-generating mechanisms) and *auditory scene analysis* (Rocchesso-Fontana 2003).

7. In a way, the first contribution to the biopolitics of music, consisted in the path leading John Cage from the Harvard anechoic chamber to the early elaborations of *4'33"* (1951–52).

8. Barry Truax has recently discussed some of these critiques (Truax 2013).

Author Note

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