

Animal Renderings: The Library of Natural Sounds

ecopoetics

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Abstract

Today we bring you the latest post in SO!'s spring series, Live from the SHC, which follows the new research from the 2011-2012 Fellows of Cornell's Society for the Humanities, who have gathered in the A.D. White House to study "Sound: Culture, Theory, Practice, Politics." For the full series, click [here](#).

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustic Ecology, Acoustics, Animals/Animal Studies, Archival, Article

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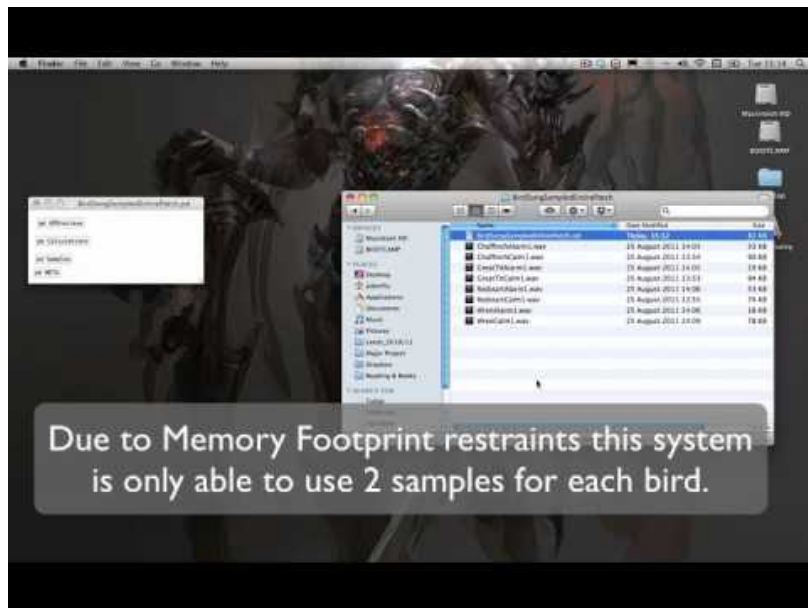
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Today we bring you the latest post in SO!'s *spring series*, [Live from the SHC](#), which follows the new research from the 2011-2012 Fellows of [Cornell's Society for the Humanities](#), who have gathered in the [A.D. White House](#) to study "[Sound: Culture, Theory, Practice, Politics](#)." For the full series, click [here](#). Today poet, scholar, and ecocritic Jonathan Skinner brings us all a treat for spring, so throw open your windows and take a deep listen. **–Editor in Chief, JSA**

This planet is singing 24/7 but are we listening to it? Take out your earbuds, turn down the music and the air conditioning, walk away from the fridge, shut off your engine, open the windows, and tell me what you hear. If you are in the humid parts of the temperate regions, chances are you'll hear right now, amidst the myriad human sounds, and depending on the time of day, the [spring peepers going](#), the [woodcocks peenting and displaying](#), a grouse drumming, the whistling of cardinals and robins, [chickadees countersinging](#), blackbirds trilling, cawing of crows, blue jays scolding, honking of geese, hooting of an owl or two, woodpeckers drumming, [house sparrows chirping](#) (in this case, to a Satie carillon), perhaps some coyotes yapping it up after midnight. Not to speak of wind in branches and leaves, water, thunder and lightning. These are just some of sounds I can pick up, with a bit of careful listening, in and around the relatively urban environment of Ithaca, New York. If you put your ear to the grass, you might hear this astonishing [Treehopper communication](#).

Or maybe you heard these sounds in some music you were listening to, in a movie soundtrack or videogame? Just as we pervade their worlds, animals pervade our environments, and their sounds are used to "render" these environments within the relatively flat dimensions of our media—the way three dimensions of spatial information get "crunched" to the two dimensions of a video game's display (see 4:00 – 5:20 for a demonstration of [Aiden Fry's](#) "generative birdsong" program below, developed through the analysis and sampling of birdsong as a solution to repetitive sound effects that can diminish the immersive quality of the game). Even the most sophisticated "surround sound" audio must "render" figuratively the envired experience of hearing.



<https://youtu.be/XGCidLwHUY>

The next time you [watch a movie](#), listen to some “ambient” music or play a videogame that renders an outdoors environment, imagine subtracting the animal sounds (either literal or evoked) from these media scapes and consider how incompletely rendered the experience would be. A reversal of the effect, as in [Gus Van Sant’s](#) use of [Hildegard Westerkamp’s](#) “[Beneath the Forest Floor](#)” soundscape, to track and underscore the anomie of certain characters through [Elephant](#), his thinly veiled recreation of the Columbine High School tragedy, also proves the rule (note especially the soundtrack from 3:10 – 3:40).

<https://youtu.be/H8kLBJmBd4A>

[Greg Budney](#) and [Mike Webster](#) explain their dedication to compiling the world’s largest and best quality archive of animal recordings (now in video as well as audio), the [Macaulay Library of Natural Sounds](#) at Cornell University, as a responsibility to future acoustic biologists, who may bring tools and concepts to the data we have not remotely conceived. Their mission is first and foremost a scientific one. However, conservation is also high on their list: Budney, an expert recordist, points out how high quality recordings—as of lekking [Greater Prairie-Chickens](#)—can be played back into the environment, to promote nesting of endangered populations.



*Cornell's Bioacousticians Performing
Field Recording for the Macaulay
Library of Natural Sounds*

These bioacousticians agree that high quality sound recordings can be a powerful way to interest laypeople in the sounds of the robin in their backyard, and, by extension, in broader issues of conservation. Sounds in the Macaulay Library also are available to the entertainment industry, so that, indeed, myriad animal vocalizations contribute to the renderings of its various media. Licensing fees in turn contribute to the conservation mission of the Library.

Rendering is not so much a matter of reproduction—accurately representing a “real” environment—as of recreating, through a consistency that “completes” the aesthetic experience, the feelings associated with an environment. (Think of the difference in quality between the “finished” HD, surround-sound movie and the behind-the-scenes “special features” on a DVD.) In [Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen](#), media theorist [Michel Chion](#) identifies an important feature of rendering in “materializing sound indices,” noises that help render, in sound and image, a particular “clump of sensations” (112-116).

For instance, spatial depth, in outdoor scenes, is often rendered through the presence of bird song or dogs barking, etc. Or consider the cooing of pigeons that often accompanies the opening of a garret window in a movie set in Paris. Or that ubiquitous red-tailed hawk’s cry indexing a “wild” landscape. The absence or thinness of these indices can be just as helpful to rendering, as when the landscape includes “ethereal, abstract, and fluid” entities: “out of touch” characters in [Jacques Tati films](#) or the drawn characters in [Who Framed Roger Rabbit](#), where hollow, lightweight, plastic sounds help us believe that we are indeed seeing (or, as Chion reminds us, “hear-seeing”) cartoon characters (watch from 1:19 – 1:33 for the famous “clang” the drawn Jessica Rabbit makes as she collides with the live action Eddie Valiant).



<https://youtu.be/XAnNvnVilpo>

[Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*](#), both the book and the film version, deploy effectively the total *absence* of animal sounds to convey the uncanny complex of feelings bound up in environmental apocalypse—the “silent spring” invoked by [Rachel Carson](#) a half century ago in her [indictment](#) of the toxic legacy of the chemical industry.

In his study of environmental aesthetics, [Ecology Without Nature](#), ecocritic [Timothy Morton](#) faults rendering for perpetuating an “ecomimetic illusion of immediacy,” an “ambient” art that ultimately comes in between us and the life it is supposed to bring us close to (36). Rendering lures us into the “relaxing ambient sounds of ecomimesis,” precisely when we need to hear “the screeching of the emergency brake” (as Morton puts it: “whistling in the dark, insisting that we’re part of Gaia” 187, 196). However, Chion notes that “the disjunctive and autonomist impulse [à la Godard] that predominates in intellectual discourse on the question (‘wouldn’t it be better if sound and image were independent?’) arises entirely from a unitary illusion” that there is “a true unity existing elsewhere” ([Audio-Vision](#) 97-98). Such unity is in fact elusive: for instance, it can be difficult to identify the sources of sounds in “nature” (consider the bewildering [variety of blue jay calls](#)), while the notion that a sound can on its own invoke more abstract characteristics of its source, especially when it is produced by a nonhuman species, betrays a kind of magical thinking. (Forms of non-western magical thinking actually acknowledge the disjunctive quality of natural sounds by referring, for instance, to “voices in the forest.”) Also, sound is so context dependent, and our listening is so strongly influenced by the conventions of our media, that “sound in itself” can be a very slippery object. Chion notes that we need something like an “auditory analogy of the visual *camera obscura*” —i.e. the monitoring and recording of soundscapes—to help us listen to “sounds for themselves and to focus on their acoustical qualities” (108).

In a time of mass extinction, how are we to approach the rendering of animal sounds in our mediated environments? Do these sounds have agency? Does listening to and “capturing” animal sounds bring us closer to them, or only lure us, with an illusion of immersion and unity, away from realizing the dark nature of our ecology, and the urgent reforms needed, if we are actually to help animals (does our rendering and consumption of whale song—pace what [Songs of the Humpback Whale](#) has done for whale conservation—end up perpetuating the same extractive process that “renders” whale blubber)?



Connecticut Warbler by [Carol Hanna](#), *Songs of the Birds*

I would say that, so long as we approach these sounds neither as a substitute for, nor as an experience “less than,” the daily practice of listening to our environments, a resource like the Macaulay Library can add immeasurably to our awareness of the diversity, and the vulnerability, of life on Earth. (Another resource worth exploring is the British Library’s [Environment & nature sounds archive](#), especially the collection of [early wildlife recordings](#).) Careful attention to renderings of animal sounds in our media can make us aware of the extent to which we “render” the landscape around us, through selective habits of listening, and open us to the disjunctive, noisy, reverberant, distorted sounds such renderings obscure. (R. Murray Schafer made this point long ago, in his book [The Soundscape](#) urging us to listen to noise if we want to defeat it.) Clips posted here, of media using birdsong to render scenes of human violence, state the complexity of our pastoral aesthetics in an exaggerated way, but every day our listening has access to a range of sonic collisions.

Consider the famous recordings of [nightingales in Beatrice Harrison’s backyard](#), to the accompaniment of her cello, as well as to RAF bombers—on [Minnesota Public Radio’s Music & Nature](#). Part of what we will hear when we listen with open ears is our own domination of the soundscape, one that can have concrete implications for the survival of other species (Chris Clark, head of [Bioacoustics Research at Cornell](#), has imaged the way the [noise of shipping lanes](#) impacts the [acoustic habitat](#) of endangered Right Whales.) How might the infrasonic or ultrasonic vocal communications—of blue whales, elephants, mice and bats, for instance—that operate beyond the range of the naked human ear (but not of our instruments) impact our media environments? The “materializing sound indices” of recordings can be used to return us to the embodied, imperfect natures of these other beings, whose vulnerability, philosopher Jacques Derrida suggests in [The Animal That Therefore I Am](#), it is our own nature to follow.



A Gaggle of Grackles by Flickr User Dan Machold

The more we listen to the environment [acousmatically](#), the better critics we become of our media environments' often crassly commercial renderings. Many of these sounds (see also some of the recordings collected on the Earth Ear label's [Dreams of Gaia](#)) are simply [beautiful](#), or [astonishing](#)—conveying an aesthetic dimension alluded to in veteran nature recordist [Bernie Krause](#)'s new book, [The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places](#). (My concern with a focus on the exotic is that privileging “wild places” might have the effect of devaluing the “not wild,” i.e. where most people live—places nonetheless full of wild creatures—and where we might best develop our listening.) Finally, the more we find ways to render these sounds meaningfully in our own lives, outside patterns of consumption, the better chances are we'll begin to develop (politically, ethically) meaningful relationships with these other species, species with whom we must collaborate if we want to tend the web of life that so desperately needs our care.

<https://youtu.be/PCCpnDtgXk>

**Featured Image Credit: Digital Collage Bird Art by Flickr User Peregrine Blue

Jonathan Skinner founded and edits the journal [ecopoetics](#), which features creative-critical intersections between writing and ecology. Skinner also writes ecocriticism on contemporary poetry and poetics: he has published essays on the poets Mei-meï Berssenbrugge, Ronald Johnson, Bernadette Mayer, Lorine Niedecker, and Charles Olson; on *Poetries of the Third Landscape*, *Documentary Poetics*, and *Poetry Animals*; and an ethnographic study of the Tohono O'odham Mockingbird Speech. Skinner's poetry collections include *Birds of Tifft* (BlazeVox, 2011), *Warblers* (Albion Books, 2010), *With Naked Foot* (Little Scratch Pad Press, 2009), and *Political Cactus Poems* (Palm Press, 2005). Skinner's latest creative project is a book on the urban landscape designs of Frederick Law Olmsted.