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The chance meeting of a goose and a plover on a turntable: Chris Watson's wildlife sound recordings

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ABSTRACT

Wildlife recordings have an uncertain position within media industries and genres because they can circulate as documentary soundtracks, sound art, or music. In this paper, I explore the cultural life of such recordings through an examination of the work of wildlife sound recordist Chris Watson. After a sketch of his professional career and discussion of the relation between his career trajectory and formal solutions to the spatial and temporal problems of wildlife sound recording, I consider the status of Watson's work as audio-based eco-criticism, via the record *El Tren Fantasma* (2011).

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An album by the British sound recordist Chris Watson was once described as a “powerful blast of natural musique concrète intended to produce a spark from the chance meeting of a goose and plover on a turntable” (Solomons 2013). In that one dense phrase, Watson's work is associated with several domains of sonic expression: experimental musical composition via references to musique concrète; avant garde art through the famous definition of surrealism as “the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella”; cultures of popular music by the reference to the turntable; and wildlife field recording with the goose and plover. These disparate sonic elements, the critic suggests, are brought into harmony by Watson's audio design. The cascade of references in this quote can also serve as a kind of road map to Watson's career trajectory, which encompasses British punk rock of the 1970s, film and television nature documentary, and contemporary sound art. In this essay, I disentangle some of the key formal elements of Watson's sound art, place them within the context of his experience in multiple fields of sonic production, and assess his work's eco-critical potential.

By referring to Watson's career trajectory, I build upon to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who used the term “trajectory” to describe “the set of successive movements of an agent” through various cultural fields (Bourdieu 1993, 276; Hesmondhalgh 2006). Bourdieu claimed that the study of career trajectories encompasses both the structure of artworks and the structure of the cultural fields of production in which they emerge. Similarly, I approach Watson's releases on the Touch label as both laboratories of formal invention and manifestations of a career trajectory that has been shaped by several sonic art worlds.¹ Watson's work and career demonstrate Bourdieu's assertion that, when faced with the choice of examining an

individual biography, a field of cultural production, and the analysis of individual works and their intertextual relationships, “we have to do all these things at the same time” (Bourdieu 1993, 9). Such a multifaceted approach is well suited to the genre of wildlife field recording because it exists at the nexus of multiple art worlds and many of its practitioners, like Watson, have wide-ranging and varied careers in sound.

Watson began his professional career as a member of the musical group Cabaret Voltaire, and one methodological framework for his “natural musique concrète” can be found in the field of ecomusicology. Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe define ecomusicology as “a multi-perspectival field” that “considers musical and sonic issues, both textual and performative, related to ecology and the natural environment” (Allen and Dawe 2016, 1; also Edwards 2016, 153). For Jeff Todd Titon, it involves “the study of music, nature, culture, and the environment at a time of environmental crisis” (Titon 2013, 9; also Titon 2016, 69). Watson’s work tends to lack an overt environmental polemic, but he has become a key figure in the world of wildlife sound recording, a genre that has great potential to foster what Titon calls a “relational epistemology” whereby sound brings listeners “into bodily experience of the presence of other beings” (Titon 2015, 145).

Cabaret Voltaire were part of the British punk scene of the 1970s, a musical genre not ordinarily considered to be aligned with the environmental movement. David Ingram writes that punk “had no interest in the natural world, and disdained both the back-to-the-land agrarianism of the hippie communards and the rural chic of the nouveau riche rock stars in their retreats in Laurel Canyon, Woodstock and Aspen” (Ingram 2010, 169). There are, however, stylistic continuities between Watson’s work with Cabaret Voltaire and his recordings of natural sounds. Moreover, Watson’s punk pedigree helped to establish a cultural niche for wildlife sound recording that was distinct from adjacent styles like “new age”.

Between his time as a popular musician in the 1970s and a sound artist in the 1990s and 2000s, Watson made field recordings as a member of the production crew for film and television nature documentaries. The ecomusicological perspective can thus be supplemented by scholarship in the field of Sound Studies, since scholars in that field are adept at “thinking across sounds” and examining sonic forms and practices as they move across genres, technologies, and cultural contexts (Sterne 2012, 2). Such an approach is useful in tracking the circulation of wildlife sound recordings as they are heard in the context of documentary film soundtracks, sound art installations, or experimental music. As we shall see, Watson’s experience in film and television played a crucial role in shaping some of the distinctive formal attributes of his subsequent sound art.

Attending to the interplay among the points on Watson’s unique career trajectory can also help us to appreciate his Touch releases as audio-based eco-criticism.² In particular, the album *El Tren Fantasma* (2011), a sonic depiction of a train journey across Mexico, creates a pattern of environmental juxtapositions that puts a ghostly spin on the eco-critic Leo Marx’s discussion of the “machine in the garden”. Furthermore, the album develops a sonic aesthetic that answers Dipesh Chakrabarty’s call for a perspective that brings together “the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capitalism” (Chakrabarty 2009, 213). Before I turn to the analysis of individual texts and their intertextual relationships, I will sketch Watson’s professional history leading up to the Touch releases of the 1990s and 2000s, and demonstrate how that career trajectory shaped his approach to wildlife sound recording.

Chris Watson was born in 1953 in Sheffield, England, and received the gift of a portable tape recorder when he was a young boy. He was soon using the device to capture natural sounds: Watson describes the thrill of discovering “another world” when he recorded birds in his back garden (Schoepe 2010; “The Listeners”, 2013). His interest in wildlife recording took a backseat to music when, in 1973, he became a founding member of the Sheffield-based musical group Cabaret Voltaire. Watson was the band’s “keyboard player and electronics manipulator” and developed a William Burroughs-esque cut-up approach to found sound that would become one of the defining features of the genre of industrial music (Fish 2002, 59; also Reynolds 2006b, 89).

According to music critic Simon Reynolds, the “definitive Cabaret Voltaire sound” consisted of a drum machine’s “hissing hi-hats and squelchy snares”, Watson’s “smears of synth slime”, Stephen Mallinder’s “dankly pulsing bass”, and Richard Kirk’s “spikes of shattered-glass guitar” (Reynolds 2006b, 99). One writer described the band as “the avant-garde weirdness of Stockhausen meets the leather jacketed wildness of the Velvet Underground” (Fish 2002, 60–1). Cabaret Voltaire’s signature sound can be heard on “Sluggin for Jesus (Part One)” (1981), which features a hypnotic electronic dance beat, angular guitar chords, and recordings of an American television evangelist.³

Cabaret Voltaire worked outside of the established popular music industry, recording in their own Sheffield studio, Western Works, and releasing their music on independent record labels like Rough Trade and Factory Records (Fish 2002, 61–2). They thus took part in attempts to democratise and decentralise the record industry during the era of 1970s punk rock (Hesmondhalgh 1997, 255–6). Reynolds writes that Cabaret Voltaire were developing “the model for a kind of post-socialist microcapitalism, an autonomy that represented if not exactly resistance, then a form of grassroots resilience in the face of top-down corporate culture” (Reynolds 2006b, 99). David Hesmondhalgh claims that labels like Rough Trade were only partially successful in these attempts to change the industry, due in part to “punk’s ambivalence about popularity” (Hesmondhalgh 1997, 272).⁴ Watson shared that ambivalence and, despite Cabaret Voltaire’s success, he became frustrated with the popular music scene and began to search for “another way of working with sound” (Watson 2015).

That search led him to revisit a long-standing interest in wildlife sound recording. In fact, during his final years with Cabaret Voltaire, he admitted that he had become more interested in the natural sounds he was recording outside the studio than the ones he was creating inside of it (Schoepe 2010).⁵ Watson left the group in 1981 and took a job in the sound department of the UK regional television broadcaster Tyne Tees, where he learned about many aspects of sound production and began to take on freelance assignments.⁶

Watson accomplished a transition to a second field of sonic production, but it was not clear to all observers that the move to television had been for the better. In fact, some interpreted it as marking a loss of agency and prestige. A historian of the Sheffield music scene, Mick Fish, reacted with incredulity when he learned that Watson had left Cabaret Voltaire for the Tyne Tees job: “Was the man off his head?” Fish wrote. “The idea of someone quitting a band in favour of a nine-to-five sounded like pure lunacy to me” (Fish 2002, 108–9). Fish was dismissive of Watson’s “rather curious fixation about recording the sounds of bird noises” and complained that “it was all rather more Johnny Morris than Johnny Rotten” (Johnny Morris was a BBC TV presenter in the 1960s known for children’s animal programmes) (Fish 2002, 146).

Watson's career move could appear to be "pure lunacy" in part because it seemed to cross a threshold between what Bourdieu calls the field of restricted production (in which the coin of the realm is prestige and the respect of one's peers), and the field of large-scale production (that is, of mass and popular culture wherein the primary aim is reaching a large audience) (Bourdieu 1993, 15–6).⁷ By moving from the world of "post-socialist microcapitalism" ("Johnny Rotten") to the world of family-friendly public mandate television production ("Johnny Morris"), Watson seemed to have crossed from one industrial logic to another, with the risk of an accompanying loss of prestige amongst his peers. Fish's reference to Watson's "nine-to-five" employment also suggests a change in status from artist to craftsperson, with his labour now defined by an employer (Becker 2008, 274). Moving from being part of a musical collective to being a below-the-line member of a television crew could be seen as entailing the loss of a certain degree of artistic agency.

Critics like Fish emphasised the contrast between punk and natural history broadcasting, but the media scholar John Parham draws our attention to an implicit environmental awareness in punk. Parham finds this awareness in the theme of alienation, which was often expressed by punk groups in terms of "imprisonment in degraded toxic environments" (Parham 2012, 76). Drawing upon the work of eco-critic Lawrence Buell, Parham refers to punk's "toxic discourse" which manifested as expressions of anxiety about the environmental hazards of modern consumer life (Parham 2012, 77). Hearing punk as a form of "urban eco-criticism" makes Watson's move to recording natural environments appear less incongruous.⁸ Regardless of the level of continuity with his previous work as a musician, it is undeniable that Watson found considerable success in wildlife documentaries, and he was soon landing gigs at the BBC and National Geographic. By the 1990s, he had achieved elite status as a wildlife sound recordist, working on prestigious nature programmes such as David Attenborough's "The Life of Birds" (1998), "Life in the Undergrowth" (2005), and "Frozen Planet" (2011).

Watson was not always satisfied with the working conditions in his new field of production, however. He spoke of the "horrid state of soundtracks on natural history television" with programmes "swamped in the most inappropriate music". Watson stated that, apart from exceptional cases like Attenborough, television directors had "very low aspirations for the soundtrack" (Watson 2015). This dissatisfaction prompted him to seek out other creative outlets, one of which was radio, an area that, despite being regarded as "the poor relation" to television, seemed to Watson to allow for "far more interesting and creative work" (Watson 2015). Watson also drew inspiration from a community of wildlife sound recordists who helped to establish what the sociologist Howard Becker calls a "minor art world". Becker describes how a segment of artist-craftspeople can develop an artistic discourse around their activities through the establishment of shared standards of training and systems of evaluation (Becker 2008, 277–8). Wildlife sound recording emerged as such an art world during the decades when Watson was active as a musician and recordist. A community of British recordists founded the Wildlife Sound Recording Society (WSRS) in 1968 and held their first annual meeting the following year. The Society went on to publish a newsletter, run annual competitions, and circulate recordings of work by its members. By 1975, the Society had over 200 members, increasing to around 300 by the early 1990s (Margoschis 1974). Watson was a member throughout the 1990s, and published several articles in the Society's journal.⁹

While British wildlife recording was coalescing as an art world, sound art was finding a place in museums and art galleries through the work of artists such as Janet Cardiff, Annea Lockwood, Jana Winderen, Francisco Lopez, Andrea Polli, Peter Cusack, Christina Kubisch, Stephen Feld, Bernie Krause, Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, and Hildegard Westerkamp. The “Soundings” exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in 2013 featured wildlife field recording in installations by Jana Winderen and Toshiya Tsunoda. Watson became a prominent figure in this sonic art world when he began releasing records on the British independent label Touch, whose roster included experimental electronic musicians such as Christian Fennesz and BJNilsen. Watson’s Touch releases, beginning in 1996 with *Stepping Into The Dark*, heralded a “third act” in Watson’s career and established him as a sound artist beyond Cabaret Voltaire and the world of nature documentary. The Touch records show that his professional history did much to shape his artistic practice in this new field of sonic production.

Watson’s first release on Touch, *Stepping Into The Dark*, was what he called a “byproduct” of his work in natural history documentary. One of the perks of that job was that it allowed for extensive travel opportunities to natural habitats around the world, and Watson accumulated a large collection of original field recordings. During his travels, he noticed that some of the locations he visited “displayed remarkable and particular characteristics”. He developed a technique to capture the “spirit or atmosphere” of these places with as little interference as possible: “using sensitive microphones camouflaged and fixed in position” he would extend very long cables to a “concealed recording point, the aim being to capture the actual sound within each particular location without external influence”.¹⁰ This technique produced tracks such as “Embleton Rookery”, a sonic portrait of a churchyard overlooking the sea, and “River Mara At Dawn”, recorded in a National Reserve in Kenya.

Capturing the sonic atmosphere of a location in this manner represents one approach to the entextualisation of natural sounds: that is, it is one means by which natural sounds can be de-contextualised from their surround, and then re-contextualised as a sonic ensemble (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 73). The approach to entextualisation heard on *Stepping Into The Dark* is in line with a rhetorical tendency among wildlife field recordists to champion recordings of entire ecosystems over “close-up” recordings of single species.¹¹ Bernie Krause – a well-known wildlife sound recordist – criticises what he calls a “sound-fragment model” that “distorts a sense of what is wild by giving us an incomplete perspective of the living landscape”. He contrasts such “sound fragmentation” with “whole-habitat recordings” (Krause 2012, 33–4).¹² Similarly, sound artist Francisco López is critical of “single-species” recordings and strives for a “more systemic perspective, considering assemblages of sound-producing animal species at an ecosystem level” (López 1998). Close-ups have come under fire from media scholars as well: one refers to their “sonic sterility”; another compares visual close-ups of animals in nature documentaries to the “false intimacy” of TV talk shows.¹³

It may come as a surprise then, that Watson’s second Touch release, *Outside the Circle of Fire* (1998), is dedicated to close-up recordings of single species, with liner notes stressing that the sounds were recorded “as close up as possible”.¹⁴ Watson’s close-ups are another “byproduct” of his work in natural history documentary: he became interested in this approach when film and television editors asked him for “close-up sounds to go with close-up images” (Watson 2015). His solution was to take the personal microphones usually placed on human presenters and put them on or near wild animals. “I very quickly found out”, he said, that “the animals had much more interesting and eloquent things to say” than their human co-stars (Watson 2015). The results can be heard on stunning tracks of a whale

surfacing for air, hippopotami croaking as they emerge from a river, the roar of a red deer stag, a family of elephants sleeping, and an adult cheetah purring in a baobab tree.

Watson's recordings may be framed in close-up, but many have an affective charge that helps to defuse any criticisms of "sonic sterility" or "false intimacy". Rather than striving for a sense of intimacy, Watson has spoken of his desire to maintain the mystery of "the secret [language] of bioacoustics" (Wyse 2007, 26). One reviewer wrote that, far from evoking "a sense of kinship" with the animals, the close-ups on *Outside the Circle of Fire* prompt the listener to be struck by "the utter non-humanness of these sounds," which were "formed by throats so unlike ours that they may as well be alien" ("Untitled Review", n.d.). Furthermore, Watson's close-ups resist the charge of "sonic sterility" by moving into macabre and unsettling emotional territory. On one track, Watson placed microphones inside a fresh zebra carcass and recorded the sounds of vultures as they fed.¹⁵ Another track captures the eerie calls of a colony of seabirds with a blunt liner note that reads: "the souls of dead children are said to pass into kittiwakes".¹⁶ On examples such as these, Watson's spatial framing brings listeners perceptually close to single species but in a manner that keeps them at an emotional distance. The tone of these recordings is more Gothic horror than natural history lesson; more Warhol Screen Test than television chat show.

That distinctive mood can be heard as another byproduct of his unique career trajectory. Watson's sonic close-ups may have been inspired by work in TV documentary, but their dark affective overtones recall the toxic discourse of punk. The result is an admixture that constructs a distinctive niche for nature recordings in the cultural marketplace. Watson's aesthetic resists being categorised as "new age", which is significant given that field recordings and new age audio often draw upon a similar repertoire of sounds (waterfalls, waves, forests) and so share a generic border-zone. Consider that a pioneering example of new age recordings, Irv Teibel's "Environments" series (1969–1979), features the sound of seashores, aviaries, dawn choruses, gentle rains, country streams, and wind in the trees (Hagood 2016). The border between wildlife recording and new age seems to require a fair amount of policing, judging by the frequency with which reviewers of Watson's records go out of their way to declare that he is *not* making new age music. A few examples:

[Watson's] work ... is completely free of New Age flakiness. These recordings are by turns powerful, disturbing, illuminating; but never twee. (Everall 1998)

Watson's record is a kind of anti-new-age field recording which, instead of using natural sounds to create an audio Radox bath (full of natural essences), hurls you into the centre of nature at its most enigmatic and terrifying. (Sanderson, n.d.)

This CD is not the place to turn if you're looking for a sleep aid or an adjunct to your court-ordered anger management class, but as an emotionally evocative experience of sound. (Meyer 2007)

Rather than being "soothing sounds of the surf"-type stuff, they're dense with noises (swarms of flies, croaking birds, bowl-you-over winds). You have to listen to them actively. (Wolk, n.d.)

In one regard, this bashing of new age is unremarkable: as Ryan Hibbett has pointed out, "it is popular to dislike" new age music, which has often been deployed as "a source of contrast from which authentic works are distinguished" (Hibbett 2010, 283, 287–8).¹⁷ Hibbett argues that new age is disliked for being instrumental, and the quotes above reveal the assumption that new age recordings are used for the pragmatic purposes of relaxation, sleep aid, and stress reduction. By contrast, Watson's supporters are eager to show that his work resides in the domain of restricted cultural production; that is, it requires a mode of active

listening that is similar to the way one might attend to experimental music.¹⁸ Consider a review that compares Watson's field recordings to "the most up-to-date electronic music" with a purring cheetah akin to "a fudgy old analog synth" and bird calls that resemble "melifluous minimalist techno". "Listen to your world", the review concludes, "it may be more interesting than all the things you buy to escape from it" (Frere-Jones 1999). Through the innovative synthesis of documentary recording techniques and punk attitude, Watson's Touch releases convene a listening public that is cued to hear field recordings simultaneously as sound art, nature documentary, and experimental music.

Watson's first two Touch albums differ in their approach to the spatial entextualisation of natural sounds (whole habitat recordings vs. sonic close-ups), but with regards to temporal entextualisation, both consist of brief recordings of single continuous events. His third release, *Weather Report* (2003), takes a different approach to the temporal re-contextualisation of field recordings through the creation of longer sonic assemblages; a technique Watson calls temporal compression. As with Watson's sonic close-ups, temporal compression was prompted by work in television, when producers asked him to create sounds to accompany segments of time-lapse cinematography (Watson 2015).

Watson uses sound editing on *Weather Report* to compress hours, days, seasons, and even geophysical durations into audible form. The album is comprised of three 18-minute tracks: the first compresses 24 hours of field recordings made in Kenya; the second depicts four months in the Scottish highlands; and the third makes audible the 10,000 year journey of a chunk of ice from the top of a glacier to the Norwegian sea.¹⁹ Watson was not the first sound artist to explore dynamics of temporal compression, as indicated by Steven Feld's *Voices of the Rainforest* (1991), which presents "a recorded soundscape of a day in the life of the Kaluli people of Bosavi, Papua New Guinea".²⁰ The unique accomplishment of *Weather Report* is best appreciated when its temporal compression is heard in relation to Watson's career trajectory.

Watson stated that *Weather Report* gave him the opportunity to introduce a "narrative element" to his work, and he compared this approach to film: "In film you compress any time scale down into 90 minutes or so", he said. "I began to think about sound in that cinematic way" (Watson 2015). This cinematic model was adapted to the formal constraints of the record album, which traditionally had a length of approximately 54 minutes. Watson divided that running time into three 18-minute tracks, each representing a different scale of temporal compression. The result, particularly in the case of the third track, is a vast temporal scope that can be heard as a subtle polemic against television nature documentaries, which tend to focus on visual spectacle. Derek Bouse observes that "stillness and silence have almost no place in wildlife film ... film and television are about movement, action, and dynamism; nature is generally not" (Bouse 2000, 4–7). As with works by ecologically-minded composers like John Luther Adams, the temporal compression we hear on *Weather Report* is closer in spirit to the slow, contemplative mode that Scott MacDonald calls "ecocinema", which depicts the natural world in a way that "models patience and mindfulness" (MacDonald 2013, 19–20).²¹ *Weather Report's* temporal entextualisation provides a listening experience that integrates nature documentary, the slow, contemplative mode of experimental eco-cinema, and long-form conceptual rock albums.

Similar experiments with temporal compression can be heard on Watson's post-*Weather Report* releases *El Tren Fantasma* (2011) and *In St. Cuthbert's Time* (2013). The former compresses a five-week train journey down to 60 minutes of audio, and rewards closer scrutiny

as an illustration of the interaction of sonic aesthetics and fields of sound production. In 1999, Watson recorded sound for an episode of the UK television series “Great Railway Journeys” that documented a cross-country trip on the soon-to-be-defunct Mexican National Railway. Watson took the gig in part because he saw multiple creative outcomes for the sounds he would record, and so made a special agreement with the programme’s director to retain control of his recordings.²² Indeed, Watson used the sounds from the trip for a sound installation in Mexico City, a BBC Radio 4 programme, and *El Tren Fantasma*. We might understand the Touch record then, as an example of what Michel De Certeau calls “la perruque”: occasions when a worker’s own labour is disguised as labour for an employer (de Certeau 1984, 25–6).²³ La perruque describes one relationship that may exist between different points along a career trajectory and, as we have seen, Watson utilised the travel opportunities, training, and equipment of television work to facilitate his own sound art projects.

If la perruque gives a name to the labour dynamic behind *El Tren Fantasma*, the form of the album can be understood as a “dub remix” of a television documentary soundtrack. Just as Jamaican dub turns pop production protocols inside out – pushing voices and melodic instruments to the back, drum and bass to the fore – so Watson’s album pushes the narration, interviews, and incidental music that dominate TV documentary to the background in favour of the raw atmosphere created by the sounds inside and beside a train (Veal 2007, 34, 77). The inversion of documentary norms becomes clear when we listen to the soundtrack of “Great Railway Journeys” which can also serve as a concrete example of what Watson referred to as the “horrid” sound design and “inappropriate music” found on TV documentaries.

The soundtrack to the “Great Railway Journeys” episode in Mexico is dominated by a voice-over performed by the show’s host, the English celebrity chef Rick Stein. At one point, Stein reads excerpts from a diary recounting a backpacking trip that he took to Mexico as a young man. Apart from Stein’s rather banal observations and interviews, the other prominent element on the soundtrack is a musical score that is plodding, undistinguished, and conventionally “Mexican”. Watson’s location recordings are kept very low in the mix, and only move to the foreground when they punctuate changes in setting. For example, the sound of a horn or the Doppler effect of a passing train serve an instrumental function when they briefly signal a transition between sequences.²⁴

In the context of *El Tren Fantasma*, however, Watson’s field recordings move from punctuation to poetics. Michael Veal has described dub as “a music of charged emptiness”: an apt description of *El Tren Fantasma*, which removes Stein’s voice-over and lacklustre music to create a kind of sonic “negative image” of “Great Railway Journeys” (Veal 2007, 72). The album begins with the track, “La Anunciante” which situates the listener within the sonic space of a ghostly railway station, where monstrous trains arrive with ominous hisses of steam. With the second track, a pattern is established that characterises the rest of the album: an alternation between train sounds and field recordings that document the natural environments along the route of the journey across Mexico.

On “Los Mochis” we hear the soundscape of a train station that includes roosters, birds, and the music of a distant loudspeaker, until dogs bark and bells ring to announce the approach of a train. The track “Sierra Tarahumara” presents a natural soundscape that consists of birds, wind, and buzzing insects, with an ominous train horn resounding in the distance. The sound of the train returns to the foreground with “El Divisadero”, its horn morphing into a sustained tone, and the clacking of its wheels on the tracks looped to create a hypnotic rhythm. From the ambience of the train’s interior, we move back to natural soundscapes

with the track “Crucero la Joya”, where flies buzz in the heat and insects resemble the pulses of electronic synthesisers.

As the album progresses in this manner, it becomes a sonic version of the thaumatrope, a pre-cinematic toy disc with a picture on each side, which was spun to create the illusion of a single image. On *El Tren Fantasma*, first the train is the figure in a natural ground, and then the reverse, flipping back and forth until the two perspectives blur together. The album ends with the track “Veracruz”, where train horns shimmer and echo, and a ghostly army of trains pass into the distance, as the voice of a station announcer declares, “This service has now ceased”.

El Tren Fantasma is a striking example of the interconnection of formal innovation and Watson’s experience of multiple fields of sonic production, but it also demonstrates the potential of wildlife field recording to function as eco-criticism. Lawrence Buell argues that one component of an environmentally oriented work is that it makes the nonhuman environment present “not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (Buell 1995, 7–8). By emptying “Great Railway Journeys” of its voice-over, music, and interviews, *El Tren Fantasma* makes present the background environment of the documentary. The record can thus be heard as the realisation of R. Murray Schafer’s call for a “radical radio”: “Let the voice of the announcer be stilled. Let situations be presented as they occur without the interruption of sponsors, clocks, or editorial manipulation”, Schafer writes. “Let the phenomena of the world speak for themselves, in their own voices, in their own time, without the human always at the center” (Schafer 1993, 297).

In this regard, *El Tren Fantasma* addresses a recurring problem of entextualisation in wildlife field recording: whether to include human sounds. Sound artist David Dunn criticises wildlife recordings that remove the sound of airplanes and cars in an attempt to present “something that appears to be a pristine recording. To put that forth as the reality”, he writes, “is a lie” (cited in Ingram 2006, 131). David Michael writes that “if your knowledge of the outside world” were limited to nature sound recordings, “you would quickly discern that Earth in the late twentieth century was alive with sound of non-human animals and that man was perhaps only a benign observer with his recording devices” (Michael 2011, 207). *El Tren Fantasma* stills the voice of the announcer and allows the surrounding environment to speak, but by intermingling human-made sounds (what Bernie Krause calls anthropony) with the geophony of the wind, and the biophony of living organisms, Watson avoids presenting an uncritical conception of wilderness unspoiled by human influence (Krause 2012, 39–68). *El Tren Fantasma* does not present pristine nature untouched by humans, but instead dramatises a constantly shifting field between industrial and natural soundscapes.

The flipside of this aesthetic is that *El Tren Fantasma* cannot be heard simply as a Futurist ode to the train. Given Watson’s contributions to Cabaret Voltaire and the genre of industrial music, it is easy to hear many of the tracks on *El Tren Fantasma* as part of a long-standing tradition in modern experimental music to mobilise the sound of trains: from Pierre Schaeffer’s “Étude aux chemins de fer” (1948); to Kraftwerk’s “Trans-Europe Express” (1977); to Steve Reich’s “Different Trains” (1988). Indeed, tracks like “La Anunciante”, “El Divisadero”, and “Mexico D.F.” feature train sounds that are looped and treated in a manner that resembles a musique concrète collage. They are always followed, however, by field recordings that re-contextualise those sounds and shift our listening perspective. To borrow a phrase from Francisco

López, we might say that *El Tren Fantasma* is “as futurist as it is environmentalist” (López 1998).

The sonic encounter between the train and natural habitats enacted on *El Tren Fantasma* should be heard as part of what Leo Marx calls a tradition of “complex” pastoral works that complicate an easy sense of the “green pasture.” A key trope in that tradition is the entrance of the “machine in the garden” which represents a “clash of opposed states of mind: a strong urge to believe in the rural myth along with an awareness of the industrialization as counterforce to the myth” (Marx 1964, 25–229). Marx refers to the locomotive as “the leading symbol of the new industrial power” and describes literary accounts of it appearing “in the woods, suddenly shattering the harmony of the green hollow, like a presentiment of history bearing down on the American asylum” (Marx 1964, 27).

By oscillating between natural and industrial soundscapes, *El Tren Fantasma* replays the entrance of the “machine in the garden” on an endless loop, but with a “hauntological” twist. By “hauntological”, I refer to a genre of electronic recordings of the past decade that have been described as having a certain wistful re-engagement with styles and sounds of the past, featuring themes of ghostly presences, and symptomatic of a cultural scene that is haunted by “all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate” (Fisher 2012, 16).²⁵ Mark Fisher connects this “failure of the future” to the collapse of the postwar welfare state and the rise of neoliberal economic and cultural policies: a state of affairs represented on *El Tren Fantasma* through the ever-present knowledge that the Mexican national rail line that is being documented has ceased to exist, except in the form of the record’s ghostly sonic presences.

One track on *El Tren Fantasma*, “Aguascaliente”, enacts the hauntological version of the “machine in the garden” drama in miniature. The track begins with the sound of a biting wind, creating a natural soundscape tinged with a dark and ominous emotional register. Midway through the track, the guttural rumbling of a train engine makes its slow entrance and then whizzes past, evaporating into the distance and returning the listener to the desolate winds. This is the “machine in the garden” device, but given a different affective charge than Marx describes. In “Aguascaliente”, the train is not a “disturbing shriek” that brings “tension where there had been repose”: there is no sense of repose in the unsettling natural soundscape Watson depicts. Furthermore, the train does not arouse a “sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety” or register as “noise clashing through harmony” (Marx 1964, 16–17). Instead, the noisy, metallic sheets of wind and dematerialised phantom train are given an eerie sense of shared identity; the listener feels less their “elemental, irreducible dissonance” than their uncanny correspondence. The result is a complex sonic pastoral. As I listen, I can’t tell whether I am mourning the corruption of the desert garden by industrial society, or the loss of faith in a modernist future once embodied by the sound of the train, or the end of an era of democratic socialism that might produce a national rail service. As eco-critical sound art, *El Tren Fantasma* develops a sonic vocabulary that mixes the history of modernity and the history of ecological crisis; cultural and natural history; ghostly machines and alien gardens.

The haunting affective charge of *El Tren Fantasma* was fostered by the affordances of Watson’s unique career trajectory and the efficacy of his particular aesthetic synthesis. Watson’s work needs to be heard with an ear to the interplay of formal, industrial, and environmental perspectives, and it might serve as a model for the examination of other sound artists working with wildlife field recordings. This genre of sound art provides a rich area for

exploring the relationships that exist between sonic texts and the positions that are available to creative workers as they move across fields of sonic production. If Watson is any indication, we may find that the spark produced by the meeting of musique concrète, a goose, a plover, and a turntable, was not entirely due to chance after all.

Notes

1. He writes that the “science of cultural works has as its object the correspondence between two homologous structures, the structure of the works (i.e. of genres, forms and themes) and the structure of the literary field, a field of forces that is unavoidably a field of struggle” (Bourdieu 1993, 181).
2. Willoquet-Maricondi defines ecocriticism as a method that “takes an earth-centered, environmentally conscious approach to the study of texts and to the investigation of the relationship between these texts and the physical environment” (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 2).
3. Watson recorded the preacher while the band was on tour in America. Reynolds writes: “Cabaret Voltaire pioneered what would eventually become an industrial-music cliché, the use of vocal snippets stolen from movies and TV” (Reynolds 2006b, 101).
4. He adds that, “In the late 1980s, as the post-punk vision faded, musicians and entrepreneurs began to look elsewhere, particularly to dance music and club culture, for alternative sites of musical creativity and organization”. This was certainly the case with New Order and Cabaret Voltaire, but the latter had trouble making that move. As Cabaret Voltaire biographer Mick Fish puts it, the band’s original art-punk audience got “pissed off with the commercial direction of the music” as the group tried to appeal to dance club-goers, while to the clubbers, the band could come across as “avant-garde shite” (Fish 2002, 150). The group ended up on the peripheries of popular music scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s, too noisy for new wave, and too arty for the dance floor.
5. “I always wanted to leave the studio and get outside into the Derbyshire countryside” (Watson 2015).
6. His work there included recording live music for the music programme “The Tube” and post-production sound design and location recording (Watson 2015).
7. This can also be understood as a shift from an “editorial logic” in which media professionals aim to produce content that “holds up to peer review, wins trade awards ... builds prestige and acknowledgement throughout the industry” and a “market logic” that creates content for “as wide an audience as possible” (Deuze 2007, 98–9).
8. Parham writes, “a negative perception of the urban environment was one of the ways in which this class-bound experience of alienation and injustice was articulated in currents of thought that were ... closely connected to what might be called urban ecocriticism” (Parham 2012, 77).
9. See Watson (1991, 1999, 2001). In July 2014, Watson was named President of the WSRS.
10. See http://touch33.net/catalogue/to27_chris_watson_stepping_int.html
11. This approach is associated with the development of the “parabolic reflector”, a device that allowed sound to be recorded with a certain selectivity, and was used to isolate and record individual species by the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University in the US and Ludwig Koch in the UK in the 1930s and 1940s.
12. Krause refers to “acoustic snapshots of solo animals”, which he characterises as “carefully abstracting brief individual sound sources from within the whole acoustic fabric” (Krause 2012, 97).
13. For scholar Joeri Bruyninckx, close-up recordings made with parabolic microphones tend to create a “sonic sterility” that lacks perspective, as though the sounds were “coming from nowhere” (Bruyninckx 2012, 138–40). Derek Bouse’s description of visual close-ups of animals in nature documentaries as akin to the “para-proxemics” of television talk shows, since such close-ups ask viewers “to confront a wild animal in what *appears to be* our personal, or even intimate space, which we generally reserve for friends, intimates, and loved ones” (Bouse 2003, 129–30).
14. See liner notes here: http://www.touch33.net/catalogue/to37_chris_watson_outside_the.html.

15. David Michael uses Watson's vultures as an example of "dark nature recording", drawing upon Timothy Morton's notion of "dark ecology" (Michael 2011, 209–10). Watson's recordings are literally "dark" in the sense that they are frequently recorded under the cover of darkness (see for example, "River Mara at Night" and "Midnight at the Oasis" on *Cross-Pollination* (2011)). Watson spoke of his interest in "atmospheres at night in wild places as they point up an exciting, secret world upon which we can eavesdrop, appreciate and enjoy, but not necessarily understand" (Toop 2004, 53).
16. Similarly, the track "Embleton Rookery" on *Stepping Into The Dark* features the raucous calls of rooks, along with a note that ponders whether the birds might be the reincarnated souls of shipwrecked sailors.
17. New age music has also been critiqued for offering a narrow affective range, "bends its efforts almost entirely toward peace, relaxation, and transcendence" (Hibbett 2010, 283, 287–8). See also Ingram on David Dunn: "Dunn explicitly positions his art within an avant-garde tradition that opposes the more deliberately commercial, New Age soundscape recordings produced for a mass audience, which use natural sounds for what he sees as the superficial purposes of relaxation and entertainment" (Ingram 2006, 125–6).
18. There is a long history of decrying passive or "tap listening": see Lacey (2013, 125–84). Hibbett notes: "serious listening – the importance of music listening as an active and intellectual process – is a much cited argument against new age music" (Hibbett 2010, 294).
19. The concept was inspired "when a scientist threw a handful of ice on a glacier" and stated that it would take that long to reach the bottom ("He was in Cult Sheffield Band Cabaret Voltaire", 2014).
20. <http://www.folkways.si.edu/voices-of-the-rainforest/world/music/album/smithsonian>
21. See also Ingram (2013, 47). Gregg Mitman worries that, "conditioned by nature on screen, we may fail to develop the patience, perseverance, and passion required to participate in the natural world with all its mundanity as well as splendor" (Mitman 1999, 207).
22. Watson spoke of the "incredible opportunity to record sounds in a train across Mexico and get paid for the privilege. I could easily fulfil the production requirements and record tens of hours of material". The director agreed, saying that he had "no interest in the sounds" after the show had aired (Watson 2015).
23. De Certeau gives the examples of the secretary who writes a personal letter on "company time" and the who cabinetmaker "borrows" equipment from the shop to make their own furniture (de Certeau 1984, 25–6).
24. The episode can be seen at http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x22p2hi_great-railway-journeys-mexico-rick-stein_shortfilms
25. We might note that television sound has a central place in the critical discourse on musical hauntology. Simon Reynolds writes that, "a generation that was exposed to weird electronic sounds at a formative age" on children's television. "The shuddery impact of those unearthly timbres has left an audio-erogenous scar, as if they were molested by aliens" (Reynolds 2006a). The name of a prominent record label in the genre, Ghost Box, is a reference to TV. Given Watson's career arc, we might say that the balance has shifted from Johnny Rotten to Johnny Morris.

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