

Echoes Return

pali meursault

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If sound is like the wind, then it will not stay put.

—Tim Ingold

The Échos festival has been held on four occasions now in a somewhat remote valley in the Alps where, finding themselves facing a concave cliff, three sound engineers had the far-fetched idea of installing giant loudspeakers to amplify the natural echoes of the location. I am lucky enough to have been invited twice, the first time to play, the second time to head up a creative project which led to the release of a record.

My research practice is based on field recordings. The electroacoustic material of my compositions always comes together in relation to places I encounter or travel through. Sometimes these are 'natural' environments, but most often heavily affected by human presence, resonant with human activities. What was very particular about the valley of Le Faï was that the sonic environment comprised not only the geography, the climate, and the wildlife of the place, but also the music of colleagues, which gave rise to a project dealing with questions around the reappropriation of their works. This approach was discussed with them beforehand, but it was also the place itself that made it possible. As we wrote in the sleeve notes to the record, we already knew that 'playing there implied to let go of sounds (more than usual), to hear them (almost look at them) disappear into the mountain and come back transformed: a few seconds' echo and already they belong to the valley'.¹ My work then consisted in collecting these sounds as well as those emanating from the geophony of the site, neither hierarchizing nor discriminating between the two sources.

Everyone who has played up there has been confronted by an unfamiliar relation to sonic space. Propelled through the horns at a speed of 320 metres per second all the way to the point where they echo off the cliff and return, our sounds awakened a phenomenon that overflowed normal habits of spatial perception and the appreciation of acoustic coloration. Here the echo becomes detached from its sources to such a degree that it becomes a tangible, autonomous matter: the voice of the mountain articulating its responses to our sonic solicitations. Given sufficient time to tame the phenomenon, the horns of Le Faï and the rocky cirque of the valley became an instrument unto itself, a giant effects unit affecting the spatial and temporal plasticity of sound. The sound was transformed with every metre it travelled, all along the complex lines formed by the mountainsides, with the echoes sending back multiple testimonies of its journey an eternity of a few seconds later.

Although the setup was immediately fascinating and fun to play with, it also called for an unlearning of acquired habits in regard to the control of signal and of acoustics. You had to just accept the dispossession and adapt your gestures and sounds appropriately so as to leave the mountain time to breath and to express itself. Some were already experienced in dealing with environments that make a significant contribution to the way that music sounds, but I don't think any of us had experienced it on this kind of scale. For myself, Le Faï was an opportunity to develop my practice and my listening, but also to question the techniques and discourses within which they were enmeshed.

Control

¹ pali meursault, (*échos*), (Dôme, 2018).

As a worker in applied sound, I had learned certain rules of acoustics, such as the principle that the power of a signal diminishes by six decibels every time you double the distance. But rather than consider distance as a loss of sound information, and environmental reflections as the scrambling of a direct signal, powerful contextual experiences invite one to reverse this point of view: to apprehend movements of sound not in terms of what they take away but in terms of what they contribute to the vibration, and to understand the listening context as a partner in the musical performance.

It would obviously be entirely wrong to imagine that the principles of acoustic ‘neutrality’ have always been in force. The idea of having the ability to remove or standardize the effects of the environment upon sound is ultimately only a recent invention of engineering, designed to promote communication and the commoditization of sonic and audiovisual productions: the reproducibility of an emitted signal guarantees the reproducibility of the experience itself. Inversely, one would be quite justified in considering every cathedral as a singular acoustic environment, impossible to reproduce exactly or to reduce to a standard like those that preside over the architecture of cinemas or ensure the ‘fidelity’ of domestic listening technologies. Where cathedrals and cinemas differ as technologies of listening is the way in which the models of power expressed by their architectures produce and structure subjective experience: in one case centralized in a religious site, in the other distributed across entertainment networks. It might also be argued that the devotion inspired by the singularity of acousmoniums is situated somewhere between these two poles.

As Juliette Volcler has demonstrated in her research,² the conjoint notions of control of sound and control *by* sound are not limited to architecture. Sound is at the heart of the use of public spaces and their privatization and is also present on the battlefield. For Athanasius Kircher, it was just as important to study the propagation of sound through the open space of the countryside as it was to understand architectural reverberations. His cries from the Chapel of Mont Eustachy were among the very first experiments in sound propagation, prefiguring modern acoustics.³ Looking at Kircher’s engraving showing lines of sound guided by ‘speaking tubes’ out across the countryside, it is tempting to see a parallel with the horns of Le Faï. In a certain sense, however, we might say that Kircher’s studies—despite the esoteric nature of the ‘fantastic mechanics’ he describes—marked out the future territories of sonic control: in terms of both the *vectors* that organise acoustic propagation and the measurement of the psycho-sociological *effects* that the phenomenon produces upon the inhabitants, who liken it to a ‘miracle’.

Weaving

The obstacle of the cliff does not so much send back sound as diffract it into a multitude of other sounds. The echo comes but, paradoxically, what it reports back to us is a failure to ‘transport’ the sound, since on the way it has become impossible to preserve the integrity of the original source or to locate the point from which it originated. So the echoes challenge communication, just as they challenge the radiant sonic manifestation of power over territory—such as the ecclesiastical power that church bells assert over a parish.⁴

During the Échos festival, the public was invited to join an acousmatic experience: rather than forming an audience before the person who is playing, it became more interesting to lose oneself in the mountain, to find a singular listening point, or even to move around so as to continuously feel the modulations of sound in the space. The infinite complexity of the mountainsides of the Le Faï cliffs, shaped by the hazards of geology, don’t conform to the rigid vectors of an architected acoustics. No more, perhaps, than they would yield to even the most sophisticated analyses in terms

² See Juliette Volcler, *Le son comme arme* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), and *Contrôle* (Paris: La Rue Musicale, 2017).

³ Athanasius Kircher, *Phonurgia Nova, sive Conjugium mechanico-physicum artis* [1673] (Paris: Hachette Livre BNF).

⁴ See Alain Corbin, *Les cloches de la terre* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994).

of 'convolution', since the wind, the river, and both animal and human presences also play their part in the unpredictable variations of this sound environment.

The vocabulary developed by Tim Ingold in his anthropology of lines⁵ is perhaps the most appropriate one in which to explore how the echoes of Le Fai are not simply an opportunity to complicate acoustic representations, but offer us an entirely different kind of sensible apprehension of space. Going beyond the quantifiable reiteration of a phenomenon along the 'straight lines' of acoustic 'vectors', echoes instead proliferate 'threads' of listening, their interlacing giving the sonic environment the form of a 'weaving' that cannot be reduced to a sum of samples. So that walking the sinuous lines traced out by mountain paths becomes the best way to sense their undulations.

We may then ask whether fixing this impermanence in the form of a record was really the most appropriate way to share these sensations. Behind the vanity of the fabrication of objects, however, there also lies the possibility of proliferating listening yet further. The record became an echo of echoes, and an opportunity to allow oneself to be dispossessed of one's music just a little more, so that other lines may be extended.

⁵ Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007).