

Sound Threshold - *Whispering in the Leaves*
A literary travelogue across *Dusk and Dawn, Display and Displacement, Darkness and Diviners*

Removed from their original settings, and placed in another location – just like the exotic plants in this glasshouse – Chris Watson's sounds for *Whispering in the Leaves* were mostly gathered in inaccessible places and difficult conditions. There is sense, carried by these birdsongs and these insect buzzes, which eludes categorisations and opens up to a more haunting complexity. These sounds do not create a fixed aural image, but a mutable surface that allows the listener to slide into the space of fiction: the changing time of the day, and the spatial distribution of sound, favour the emergence of an eventful auditory narrative. Chris himself, in his CD's, is always keen on accompanying his audio tracks with texts, which constitute a written transposition of his listening experiences, as if they were diary entries of a tireless, attentive traveller. These texts do not present any stance for mimesis as such: they are narrations of specific events, they disclose stories within the places, and they prove how a narrative attaches itself to each listening experience.

For example, here is the entry for a track he recorded in Bosque Seco, Costa Rica, in 1995, from his first CD *Stepping into the Dark*:

I left the camp at 5am this morning and followed the winding path east towards my marker. Within the forest it was still very dark and quiet, with rising, warm dry air. Just as the light was breaking through the canopy, I found my site at a fork in the path. I rigged up the tape recorder. The temperature began to climb like a jet off a runway. The acoustics changed, the orchestra awoke and the forest found its rhythm.

Or, here is a chronicle from a track called *Scanuppia*, in the *Cima Verde* CD produced by Sound Threshold in 2008:

At 4am this morning Renato, Sergio, Silvia and I walked quietly into this high forest, it was very dark within. By dim torch light Renato skilfully picked our route across the steep slopes to avoid noisy steps on the remaining patches of ice and snow. 5am and pale greyness through the canopy of spruce trees by the time we pressed up against the trunks to conceal ourselves and await the capercaillie leks. Five spirits of the forest dancing in small clearings all around.

Such diary entries could remind of travel diaries of the early explorers, with their careful notations of the places and the species and the landscapes that they encountered. Think of William Dampier's extraordinary account *New Voyage Round the World*, from 1717. Before the late 19th century, no other forms of 'recording' were available other than words, and sketches. Hence the precision in the use of words. With Chris, it sounds like the accuracy and precisions of capturing a sound are in turn mirrored in words: as close as we can be to those sounds, there something elusive in their very nature, which misses out, and this sense of being there and not being there can only be retained in text.

We could also think of another tireless traveller, Herman Melville, who in *The Encantadas, or Enchanted Islands* transposed his journey to the Galapagos in 1841 (six years after Charles Darwin's) to an allegorical text where the mountain of Rock Rodondo shares similarities with the Purgatory and where the main sound is a hiss, a 'screaming flights of unearthly birds'. Chris – who also visited the Galapagos - often relates his recordings as 'atmospheres of special places' and believes in the special, unique charge that each place brings within, and within its sounds. There is a sense of haunting, and of unknown forces unravelling, that seep through his works. He invites the listener to pay attention to an uncanny sense of wonder: the exotic dimension in *Whispering in the*

Leaves does not stand for an idyllic paradise, but calls for a closer scrutiny of what is unfamiliar. It presents the rainforest as a place that is driven by non-human rhythms – its dark, threatening nature resonates, and although it does not belong to us, we are drawn to it. Watson calls it ‘an alien empire of insects and amphibians’, and he captures this alien dimension at the edge: in moments of transition, not only between night and day, as in the two sections of the installation, *Dawn* and *Dusk*, but also from a habitual listening mode into a more peculiar one. By doing so, his sounds point – to quote the title of his first record – at yet another way of ‘stepping into the dark’. Such charged sense of wonder and of unknown, was reported by many writers who confronted themselves with the exotic dimension of the unknown forest. It is another forest, the African forest around Congo, that was ‘recorded’ by Joseph Conrad in *Heart Of Darkness*:

There were moments when one’s past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect.

Watson’s approach relies on framing a soundscape – not only spatially, deciding where to place the microphones, but also temporally, choosing to record at specific hours and seasons, with a specific idea of time rendition and compression. In addressing the issue of scientific representation in *Pandora’s Hope* (1999), Bruno Latour showed how it constantly pushes the world away and brings it closer: ‘In losing the forest, we win knowledge of it.’ Likewise, Watson’s aural re-presentations take shape across a combined sense of not belonging to those sounds, yet getting closer to them and to their texture across the experience of listening. It is the experience of listening that, again, discloses the uncanny aural texture in *Heart Of Darkness*:

We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing little ball of the sun hanging over it – all perfectly still – and then the white shutter came down again, smoothly, as if sliding in greased grooves. I ordered the chain, which we had begun to heave in, to be paid out again. Before it stopped running with a muffled rattle, a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. The sheer unexpectedness of it made my hair stir under my cap. I don’t know how it struck the others: to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed, so suddenly, and apparently from all sides at once, did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise. It culminated in a hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking, which stopped short, leaving us stiffened in a variety of silly attitudes, and obstinately listening to the nearly as appalling and excessive silence. [...] The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind.

This sense of charged stillness, of anticipation of something that is about to happen but is not there yet, is channelled across an enhanced sense of listening, as recorded through words. The final note here is an open question: on one hand, sounds are recorded but unknown, unclassifiable (on commenting *Whispering in the Leaves*, Chris said that many of the sounds are not even recognised by experts of that environment, many species are not identified but are there); on the other hand, there can be words that can conjure up very detailed descriptions of sounds, even though the sounds are not there - words reporting sounds that are only experienced within the imagination or within memory, and which leave within us at the same time – just like music – a sense of loss and of belonging.

The following is a letter that was sent to the Director of the Centre of Alpine Ecology by one of their trustees, after the *Cima Verde* project that Chris had realised in the area:

Dear Anna Paola, thank you so much for the Cima Verde CD by Chris Watson that you sent me. I listened to all of it and in particular, as you may imagine, to tracks one and three. As I closed my eyes I found myself in many different places, and in many different years of my life, and at times I have gone back, with a deep nostalgia, to a long series of memories from the times I spent with my father when I was just a child, when I could hear and see those sounds. Years have gone by, but my mind has kept within certain landscapes, feelings, and sensations that those sounds have made more alive and nearly brought them back to today. Nostalgia has been mixed with a deep sense of moving, which has in turn left some space to a sweetness at the recollection of the company and the teachings of an old hunter and explorer of other times, as my father was. Unfortunately I have not been able to pass all these feelings on to my son, but thanks to these sounds I can now try and perhaps succeed, maybe with my five nephews! Thank you again so much, with best wishes, Giovanni

Daniela Cascella