

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

In the spring 2008, Sound Threshold, Daniela Cascella and myself, had the privilege to work with Chris Watson in Trentino, in Northern Italy. As part of our project, *Music and Sound Through the Landscape* in collaboration with the Centre of Alpine Ecology (CEALP) we invited Chris to take a residency in the Italian Alps, exploring the wildlife of Paneveggio Park in the Dolomites as well as the acoustic meanders of Monte Bondone. The field recordings originated by Chris in Trentino were then collected on the CD *Cima Verde (Green Peak)*, and that was the outcome of our collaboration and research about site and sound which we developed, consequentially, under the name Sound Threshold.

In this presentation for *Whispering in the Leaves*, we would like to bring into focus two aspects of the research that emerged throughout our collaboration with Chris and ultimately what coincided with our own research: the former is an investigation into modes of display and re-presentation of nature; the latter is an ongoing research into how sound is transposed and evoked within a text.

Chris Watson is a wildlife sound recordist who works for BBC nature documentaries but who also produces CDs and sound installations.

As a sound recordist he engages with different media. His main instrument is, however, the microphone.

I/we learnt this during the production of *Cima Verde*, observing how sophisticated yet very simple recording devices were employed by Chris in gathering the sound of Paneveggio Forest.

What catalyzed my/our interests in working with Chris was not the recording technique as such but how the very practice of recording and listening in situ allow us to experience, perceive and explore a place beyond visual or conventional representational modes.

Sound was the medium that Sound Threshold chose for this operation, because it bears within itself a sense of pervasiveness, because it is provisional and at the same time it belongs to places, to the point of haunting them.

According to the press release, *Whispering in The Leaves* 'will transport visitors to the dense rainforests of South and Central America through the recorded sounds of their native wildlife'. We could argue, though, that this audio piece does not have a lot to do with being transported elsewhere; it is, instead, very much about being here – in the Palm House, at Kew Gardens, surrounded by unfamiliar sounds among unfamiliar plants, that act as bearers of a different perceptual dimension that is, in turn, disclosed through listening.

The Palm House is in itself a unique place. It is in fact considered the icon of Kew Gardens by mean of representing the world's most important surviving Victorian glasshouse. Designed by architect Decimus Burton and the iron-maker Richard Turner, it was built between 1844 and 1848, a few years before the construction of the Crystal Palace, the acclaimed industrial building designed by Joseph Paxton in 1851. The building constructed in Hyde Park to host the London Great Exhibition, was eventually destroyed by fire on the 30th November 1936.

The interplay between the engineering system of Palm House as possible prototype for the design of the Crystal Palace and the parallel history of the Great Exhibition is rather poignant. It is at this point in history, at this precise moment of the Victorian age, that prompted the birth of public museums in the UK: a new mode of displaying artefacts and

objects to a wider audience.

It appears that over six million people attended the Great Exhibition. With the surplus made by it the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum were founded. The Great Exhibition inaugurated a series of World Fairs, exhibitions of cultural and industrial products that were to become a popular 19th-century feature. As a result The Great Exhibition of 1851 marks a very important step in the history of exhibition making and museology.

What we can see on display here at the Palm House are natural objects: different specimens of palms from different countries and continents.

What brings them together is light and warm temperature. Good lighting, climate control, taxonomic presentation/classification are also important requirements of art galleries and museum in order to preserve, present and display art works or manmade objects. (As in matter of preservation, temperature is also a key factor in sound recordings. At night the clarity of sound emerges and expands.)

What I am trying to highlight with these observations - digressing from the sound installation - is to think about a wider context in which the very idea of landscape and historic garden is related to culture as much as to nature.

As an art historian, I have always been fascinated by the attempt of representing and imitating nature through art forms (*mimesis*). I am thinking for example at the attempt of Leonardo da Vinci of representing through his 'sfumato' technique the atmospheric conditions of certain Northern foggy landscapes, or at the attempt of a painter such as Claude Monet of depicting - by thin brush strokes of pure colour applied directly on the canvas - the changing qualities of light.

From Renaissance to Impressionism and beyond, landscape paintings encapsulate various approaches and techniques of depicting and 'imitating' nature. 'Nature' and 'landscape' are not however equivalent terms.

As Georg Simmel remarks in his essay *Philosophy of Landscape*:

Nature, that in its very being and deepest sense has no individuality is transformed into the individual distinctiveness of 'landscape' by the human gaze that divides up and reconfigures as distinctive entities what it has divided. What the artist does is to mark off a part within the chaotic flow and infinity of the immediately apparent world ... we do this ourselves to a lesser degree and less consciously the moment that we see, in place of a field, a house, a stream or a movement of clouds, a 'landscape'.

The argument here, is that landscape is *nature* mediated by *culture*, and by culture I do not mean only art, architecture and landscape gardening, but also the curation and the display of natural objects such as in public collections of natural science as well as in historical gardens.

Another short digression.

In 2007 I attended a conference titled *Anxious Landscape* organised by UCL Urban Laboratory. David Gissen from Pennsylvania State University presented the paper *The anxious climate of the urban museum*. The paper explored the production of the indoor atmospheric environment created for the preservation of the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Egyptian temple was removed from the Aswan Dam in Egypt and re-located to the Museum where the original climate conditions were artificially re-created.

A process of de-territorialisation, as Gissen underlined, in order to provide the monumental architecture with 'environmental stability'. A process of display and

displacement that suggests how technological nature (termed here *anxious landscape*) produces an artificial climate that is more real than the real.

Going back to Chris Watson and *Whispering in the Leaves*.

Through careful placing a microphone in different natural habitats Chris captures the spirit of different places. We could call this operation 'aural framing'. A listening process that beside the creation of new sound compositions allows the preservation of sounds that might suddenly vanish.

For *Whispering in the Leaves* two moments of the day have been framed and 'represented' here: dawn and dusk.

What in the end we experience is not so much a transposition into the dense rainforests of South and Central America rather a displaced time and space. It is in this manner, through the very act of listening, that ultimately we can re-imagine this unique landscape.

Lucia Farinati