The Urgency of Listening

Sunday's sound-walk by the River Dee, as part of Maja Zećo and Luca Nasciuti's digital residency *Streaming to the Sea*, was a remarkable experience for a number of reasons. Most notably, for the first public art event following the lifting of over one hundred days of lockdown, the sound walk ran counter to the expectations of many other art events; talking was minimal, the participants were masked, there were no objects, just a collective moment experienced individually. The contrast with the normal business-focused art opening was stark.

An hour and a quarter of intense listening is quite a dislocating experience; a strange fusion of sounds normally met with indifference. What became immediately obvious is how much motor engines dull and flatten sound palettes. Thirty years ago motor engines used to sound very different (you could tell a guttural Volvo apart from a reedy Fiat by the difference in exhaust note). Now with engines standardised to meet environmental regulations, a city centre noise in daytime is an intrusive fuming monotone; the barely perceptible hum of the electric motor has yet to cut through.

During March and April's approved one hour of exercise a day, we were reminded of what life was like before cars and what it will be like soon enough, without internal combustion engines. Walking in the times of COVID became filled with the very noises that normality over-writes; bird song, bells, murmured conversation, footsteps, the ghostly pips of underemployed road-crossings, the strange awareness of your physical self-walking in a public space. The absence of the car engine in these times was tangible; the kind of urban atmosphere normally only experienced during a city walk on Christmas Day. The re-emergence of pre-lockdown sounds in recent times has, like so much else, been troubling and unsettling.

This sound-walk also made me think about urban rivers and how much we are indifferent to them. Two generations ago it would have been hard to have lived in Aberdeen, to say nothing of the Shire, without knowing at least someone who made their living directly or indirectly from the river or the harbour. In the post-industrial, digital, socially distanced present, rivers are the backdrop to an outdoor chat, the location of a nice pub lunch, lurking unfocused in the background of an instagram-bound photo burst. We rarely stop to consider how rivers and waterways actually live and make lives possible. The sound walk was one way of beginning to think this through.

Rivers form natural borders; are markers of historical time; lend their names to culture and sports; facilitate industry and leisure; and are sites of psycho-geographical imagination, as well as providing habitat for thousands of species and a workplace for those who make their living extracting from, and trading through, the sea.

The River Humber, looking towards the North Sea, 6 July 2018

I remember two summers ago standing by the vast River Humber at Barton, located on it's south bank. The river was dank brown on a misty morning, heavy with the agricultural run off from the River Ouse to the North and Trent to the south; these two great rivers become the Humber just east of industrial Goole's quirky little harbour, about thirty miles west. The soundscape was dominated distantly, by motor noise from the giant Humber Bridge, vanishing into the mist before invisible Hull on the river's opposite bank; a distant ship's horn sounded, ululating under the crunching footsteps of fellow walkers. The great river, sepia-toned in brown and grey, yawned as it met the mist, with the last marker of land, Spurn Point, also shrouded beyond sight.

Spurn Point is a sandy stitch in the Humber's gums. It's a three and a half mile arabesque line that stretches into the estuary's mouth, the last finger of land clinging onto the sea. Today it is a nature reserve for walkers and cyclists, but sometime centuries ago it was the location of the lost pirate town, Ravenser Odd. Ravenser Odd was a flourishing market town built on the Spurn's shifting sandbanks, and for a while fought a bitter battle with Grimsby for maritime trade at the beginning of the fourteenth century, using piracy.

But events in the fledgling took an apocalyptic turn by the middle of that century; great tidal surges and high levels from the North Sea inundated Ravenser in the thirteen forties, destroying houses, emptying bodies from coffins in the churchyard, and leading a terrified populace to flee; the last traces were obliterated in the *Grote Mandereke* (Great drowning of Men) storm and flood that devastated North West Europe and England, in January 1362. Ravenser is these days the kind of river legend, the lost locus of a psycho-geographical imaginary, it's material forms scattered and layered, inaccessible in brown estuary silt.

Thomas Girtin, "The White House at Chelsea", 1800. Copyright Tate, London.

Painting from nineteenth century realism to the modernism of the early twentieth century also leaned heavily on the river as a motif. From 1800, when Thomas Girtin painted the White House at Chelsea (Tate), to Whistler's *Nocturne in Blue and Silver : The Cremorne Lights* in 1872, the river was presented as an urban scene of quiet night time reflection, wonder and lurking danger. Whistler's series at Wapping focused on a now vanished industrial hinterland associated with the Thames, a theme picked by the Glasgow Boy painter George Henry in his moonlit depiction of the River Clyde, stilled industry and smoking chimneys harshly exposed in a steely midnight light.

Jack B. Yeats, "The Liffey Swim", 1923. Copyright National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

Jack B Yeats' picture *The Liffey Swim*, painted just after the last global pandemic was fading from memory, in 1923, shows a river at it's most sociable and sporting. The tidal river Liffey runs through Dublin; the annual swim event takes place between July and August every year over a set course, with hundreds of male and female participants. The first swim took place one hundred years ago this month, and takes place at high tide, to minimise the exposure of the swimmers to pollution. Yeats' painting invited the viewer in to join an excited crowd as the race reaches it's climax. In a claustrophobic, shouting crowd that makes us feel a little tense in our times, we strain with our peers from 100 years ago to see who is likely to win. Thinking of sport, this artwork, strangely, was the recipient of newly independent Ireland's first Olympic medal- a silver. Sporting Art was an Olympic category between 1912 and 1948.

Rivers also give birth to words. In French, the word *bérézina* is used for catastrophe. The origins of the word are in a river in present-day Belarus. It was here in November 1812 that Napoleon Bonaparte's retreating *Grand Armée* was trapped, by Russian forces under Kutuzov and Wittgenstein. Napoleon had planned to cross the Berezina river, which according to calculations should have been frozen solid by this time in the winter. Unfortunately, the river was not at all frozen, and was too wide and deep to cross. The river was a natural barrier that spelt terrible danger for the French.

Peter von Hess, "Crossing of the Berezina on 29 November 1812", 1844.
Copyright State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

The battle laid as heavily on the European imagination as Waterloo did for the British, even if it was far from decisive. Napoleon lost over 20,000 men killed or wounded, being saved only by the ingenuity of Dutch engineers and the sacrifice of a Swiss division at the rear of his lines. It was written about by Tolstoy in *War and Peace* (rather dismissively, as he didn't think the battle was anything like as decisive as historians liked to present it) and from the point of view of an ordinary French soldier by Honoré de Balzac in *The Country Doctor,* as well as in innumerable nineteenth century history paintings.

Today this wonderful river is a listed UNESCO biosphere, abundant with fish, beavers and wildlife, lazily winding it's way through central Belarus to a merger with the industrial Dneiper, and eventually through Ukraine to the Black Sea. It's hard to relate these past stories of military disaster, the awful sounds of November 1812's screams, galloping hooves and thunderflashes, the groans of anguish and the sullen silence of capture, with this present.

Rivers also inform our sense of local identity and belonging, even if we don't notice it. We live in a city bounded by rivers to the North and the South, and the North Sea; we negotiate these barriers daily, unseeing. Rivers give their names to cafes, dance halls, companies; football fans across Europe, from Clyde in Cumbernauld to Vardar in Skopje to Isloch in Minsk, chant the names of their favourite team forgetting that they are chanting the name of a river. The unique characteristics of a river can afford local people some pride in their uniqueness. The Bosnian river Neretva, that cuts through the

Herzegovinian capital Mostar is the most extraordinary emerald green colour, a visual intensity that makes even the most indifferent stop for a moment to lose themselves in it.

The River Vardar, Skopje, North Macedonia at sundown, 15 February 2020

In the last days of the before times, in February, I was able to take a walk along the river Vardar, that runs through the centre of the North Macedonian capital, Skopje. If the early sun setting of a winter Saturday, I walked by its side for about four kilometres, from the ASNOM boulevard through the city centre, up until the point where it merged with the Debar Maalo district where I was staying. The Vardar, a mountain river, is sadly heavily polluted, frequently with a chemical smell attached to it; slow, sluggish and shallow in the heat of high summer, barely a metre deep in the city centre. It's a river that has briefly given it's name to a region (*Vardarska*) and which has a contempt for the difficult border between North Macedonia and Greece, entering the Aegean by Thessaloniki. It's a river that defines one country, exits to the sea in another, and haunts the folk music of a third, Turkey, from the times of the Ottoman Empire. The sadness of the river in Skopje is in its abandonment, a post-industrial, unkempt afterthought, left only to occasional walkers and forlorn fishermen desperately hoping to catch something alive.

Thinking through rivers visually, culturally and historically often means thinking about past battles, stories read and told, industries been and gone, visuals seen, a favourite photograph or song. This short essay is an image heavy collage, and deliberately so. Our experience of sound is the same; a five minute walk round the block will expose you to a messy jumble of sounds seen and unseen, entangled in a ball of sonic wool.

If you've enjoyed reading this, try to do so again, this time thinking past the visuals and trying to use your imagination to think through the linked seductiveness of sound. The experience of engaging with this on line residency and taking part in the sound walk has encouraged me personally to *listen* much more in the presence of rivers and the creatures that live there. In these times of permanent crises, of algorithmic echo-chamber shouting, pandemics and looming ecocide, this need to listen, carefully, has never been a more urgent task.

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