



COMMENTARY

THE MEANING OF MUSIC

# Aesthetic Experience and Applied Acoustemology

## Blue Sky, White River Liner Notes

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Aesthetic experience is founded in the sensorially mediated, intersubjective relationship living beings have with the plentitude of the world. It is available to the watchful eye, the receptive ear, to any part of a being that is stirred and made aware of itself in the cornucopia of experience. In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey describes aesthetic experience as the sharpening of our awareness of experiential knowing itself and says that, at its height, it produces a sense of temporal contraction and unity; it is an experience in which “a being is wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive” (2005 [1934]: 17). Aesthetic enjoyment and expression are already intrinsic to our perception of the world and imbue it with meaning. Works of art accentuate this awareness and are potentially powerful and critical methods for exploring the phenomenological grounds of aesthetic experience, as well as its manifestations in and through cultures.

These assertions form the theoretical backbone of the experimental phonography project *Blue Sky, White River*, on which I have been working as a fellow at the Film Study Center at Harvard University. The project uses sound recording technologies to reveal cultural and aesthetic currents within the everyday through sounds found in Nepal, which are composed vis-à-vis local iterations of what artist and anthropologist Steven Feld has called acoustemologies, sonic ways of being in and knowing the world (Feld and Brenneis 2004; Feld 1994). In this commentary I have sketched a rough outline of the theory behind the method as I see it contributing to the anthropology of aesthetics, sound and the senses.

### The Project

*Blue Sky, White River* draws inspiration from sound works in anthropology, art, film and experimental music while nonetheless remaining at odds with each of these categories in its amalgamation of ethnographic and creative logics. It is made from radio and location recordings in Nepal that I have composed into sequences with reference to local cultural idioms, media practices and socio-politics. Each sound piece is at once referential to specific places in Nepal and yet often edited so as to exceed indexical and documentary function. Some editorial decisions are intended to make overt the constructed nature of the piece, both for aesthetic effect and to be reflective of aurality's cultural construction. The two sound pieces described here—available online at the Sensory Ethnography Laboratory website ([www.sel.fas.harvard.edu/spray](http://www.sel.fas.harvard.edu/spray))—illustrate some of the hybrid logics guiding the project.

“Wind Horse” is composed primarily from recordings made in Mukhtinath, a popular site for Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimage, and along the Kali Gandaki River basin in Mustang, a region known for its howling winds and, although in decline, horseracing and caravans. The sound work's title refers to the mythic wind horse

(Tibetan: *rlung rta*), which is said to carry prayers on the wind and whose icon is printed on colorful prayer flags seen fluttering throughout the region. The piece begins with a *mantra*, a shamanic speech act that is also associated with wind because to say a *mantra* is *phuknu* (to blow). It concludes with an impromptu sound “performance” at Mukhtinath in which I build a shale *chorten*, a pile of stones representing the body of the Buddha. Comprised of a constellation of sounds that are culturally, geographically and historically archetypical to the region, the work is an acoustic exploration of mythopoeic place and landscape.

“The Queen's Forest” is primarily made from recordings along the Rāni Ban (“The Queen's Forest,” est 1960), which borders the southern flank of Phewa Lake, and from the government-run radio station, Radio Nepal (est 1951). By juxtaposing recordings from these two government-regulated entities, both of which were established during rapid social and political change in Nepal, the sound work poses alternative sonic narratives to radio and contemporary conceptions of the natural world. The “soundscape of modernity” is heard not only through Radio Nepal but also in the reflexive use of sound-recording technologies, which have forever altered local acoustemologies and the perception of the natural world (Thompson 2002). Birdcalls compete with radio, jangling temple bells, a plane leaving for Kathmandu, and holiday boat-paddlers. A cricket chirps as Nepali women, listening to Radio Nepal in Rāni Ban, talk about the recent death of popsinger Michael Jackson, who they say had “straight hair, just like a doll.”

While the project is ethnographically and geographically informed, its disciplinary ambiguity makes it a complex endeavor that exceeds academic value alone. Individual pieces are not necessarily representative of one specific physical place (although they exploit sonic metaphors for another kind of place-making), nor is the listener presented with a specific assertion. The point is implicit: The work's form and content propose that natural and anthropogenic elements of sonic environments are *intersubjectively* meaningful, both referentially and aesthetically. Meanings may be elicited through processes of creative and reflexive editing to create ethnographically informed, aesthetically motivated phonography. The project fundamentally believes that listening is indeed more than hearing and attempts to create and make sense of the sonic environments of Nepal through composition.

### Applied Acoustemology

Since much of cultural anthropology has been concerned with meaning making, it is not surprising that anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have primarily studied sound in music, with sonic environments peripherally considered as they supplement, inspire or inform musical forms. In general sound has

mostly been but another object for study, with field recordings primarily treated as data to be mined for discursive content or as keys to musical analysis. There are exceptions to these trends, the best-known being the soundscapes of artist and ethnographer Steven Feld, such as *Voices of the Rainforest* (1991), *Rainforest Soundwalks* (2002) and *The Time of Bells* (vol 1–4, 2004–07). Lamenting the dearth of professionalism and experimentation in the anthropology of sound, Feld has said that “[u]ntil the sound recorder is presented and taught as a technology of creative and analytic meditation, which requires craft and editing and articulation just like writing, little will happen of an interesting sort in the anthropology of sound” (Feld and Brenneis 2004: 471).

Perhaps the greatest challenges to Feld's proposal are presuppositions about hearing itself. Of all the organs of sense, the ear is most frequently imagined as passive or indefensible and, along these lines, hearing is thought to be more immediate and poorly equipped to decipher the unruly sonic world (Schwartz 2003). Dewey writes of the intimacy of sound as it penetrates and stirs the inner structures of the ear, and compares it to the relative distancing allowed by vision, which only excites indirectly as it gives us “the spread-out scene” (2005 [1934]: 246). However, the immediacy and wildness of sound that he and others describe is not semiotically neutral; we apprehend sounds within what Feld calls acoustemologies, sonic ways of being in and understanding the world that are shaped by a potpourri of environmental, cultural and historical factors. Although sound most obviously has constructed meaning within music and spoken language, Feld's notion of acoustemology proposes that there are significant kinds of understanding, if not conventional knowledge, available to us through the wider sonic environments in which music is but one expression.

*Blue Sky, White River* explores the terrain of these other kinds of understanding, attempting to do something “of an interesting sort” that also contributes to theory by using sound recordings to reflect on sound through sound, a kind of applied acoustemology. More broadly, the phonography project is one of many possible stabs at an inquiry into aesthetic and sensory experience through nondiscursive forms of expression. It is a practical application of Dewey's thesis that aesthetic experience is already available to us through the senses and that art practices are ideal for its investigation. I hope that readers will hear this in *Blue Sky, White River*.

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Listen to the pieces described here at [www.sel.fas.harvard.edu/spray](http://www.sel.fas.harvard.edu/spray)