

Gheee-Zuss: The Sonic Materialities of Belief

JOHANNES ISMAIEL-WENDT ON THE MULTICHANNEL
SOUND ESSAY L'AMPLIFICATION DES ÂMES BY GILLES AUBRY¹

¹ Author's Note: In this essay I am applying a slightly modified, multistage analytical technique which I developed in my study *tracks'n'treks. Populäre Music und Postkoloniale Analyse* (Ismaiel-Wendt: 2011). In addition to adopting an associative and impressionistic approach to data collection, which "listens" to musical movements and motion simulation (so-called "audiotreks"), I also describe performative spaces, which, for example, are forged and perceived with the use of reverb and echo chambers. In a further step I listen on a more technical and musicological level and in reference to the scientific discourse. Although in this present text on Gilles Aubry's "L'amplification Ames," the analytical categories form the basis for the compilation, they are no longer clearly differentiated from each other. Only two main text modes remain, which essentially draw a distinction between spatial and movement associations and the technical and discursive debate. However, I have endeavored to ensure that any data furnished are of the same validity or vagueness. Thus, for example, elements of Aubry's recording situation are to be found in both text modes. Reference to the other scientific sources should be also read as an associative and aesthetic practice.

This is no faint noise, no brittle noise. It is a sonorous noise, one that demands to be heard. This unrelenting noise—heard not only metaphorically—is already more the envelope of an amplitude, or the motivated form of an intrinsic line, rather than something shielded or mantled, which somehow remains involuntarily perceived. The humming of static itself proves that something is there.

Composition and Spatialization Practices I

I am walking around an eight-track sound "installation" by the sound artist Gilles Aubry. In February 2012, Aubry places speakers in a rectangular corner in the foyer of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt and gives a concert. It is no ordinary concert—one in which the audience can applaud the virtuosity of an artist on stage—but neither is it a typical sound installation. The manner of its opening suggests a unique performance, a one-off event—as reflected in its billing in the program:

Friday [February 24, 2012] 6.30 pm. to 7 pm.

L'Amplification des Âmes

Live Performance by Gilles Aubry (Sound Artist, Berlin)

In Summer 2011 Gilles Aubry collected impressions from Kinshasa's religious soundscapes: a mix of the technically-amplified sounds of street preachers, evangelization campaigns, and film soundtracks from slum cinemas. Aubry's performance emphasizes the influence of audio amplifiers on the city's religious sound cosmos.

The arrangement is clear: I am not being invited to pay a fictitious visit to some soundscape or other. The focus is not on the acoustic fittings required for imagining another space—for there are no props here. It is on the acoustic equipment itself.

Is this mic on? Somebody taps it. "Pulok, pulok," yes, it is working.

Then a voice: "A!" Again a staccato: "A! A!" Of course, someone is running a soundcheck and the noise is coming from a medium-sized PA. A voice is articulating various phonemes into a microphone as a test: "Gheee!" Cut and pause: "Gheee, gheee!" And finally we hear something suggesting the semantic resolution of the check "A! A! (H)allelujah! Gh, gheee, Jesus," None of the usual "one, two—testing, testing ..." soundcheck gibberish, but instead the "making of" the spoken message: "Jesus is the King!"

The volume is spiked up: a somewhat louder speech impulse and then the PA squawks. Feedback is generated when the voice rises on the syllable "Gheee." The fall in pitch on the second syllable "zuss" is not a problem. Now it sounds fine—the feedback is at an optimized minimum level. Through the PA even the sharpest "s" is molded into a beautiful hissing sound: "Gheeezussssss."

The Sound Corpus and the Corpus of Sound I

A microphone and pick-up from an electric guitar undergoing a soundcheck: they are airborne sound and electroacoustic converters which are being tested for the service. It is vitally important that the congregation is furnished with acoustic proof that Jesus is among them. Even if a “Jesus Hallelujah” soundcheck may at first sound a little odd, it is maintaining one of the oldest traditions. After all, Jesus himself mediated his body acoustically. During the Last Supper, he took the bread and *said*: “This is my body” (Matthew 26: 26). In the various translations of the Bible and in the equally diverse Christian concepts of the Eucharist, there is at least consensus that Jesus explained the forms of his being in a spoken, and thus, in an acoustic transubstantiation.

The tracks are now heard together in time-lapse. The approaching voices and footsteps of several people walking over loose ground in flimsy footwear meld into the soundcheck. It is a quite a realistic scene—the congregation arrives while the sound system is still being tested. The layering of the soundtracks with crisp, hard edits remains, however, artificial. The theme “soundcheck” is still being played. A guitar is being tuned: e b G D A E, E A D G b b e ... getting there, and then some more fine tuning: e b G D A E, E A D G b e. Someone is singing. How can one tell whether someone is rehearsing, preparing something, or performing in front of an audience? Well quite clearly, this someone is rehearsing and testing—as the echo effect is being adjusted.

Composition and Spatialization Practices II²

This soundcheck is probably a field recording which Aubry made in one of the new Pentecostal churches in Kinshasa. The term “church” should not be confused with the European Catholic stone architecture. The checking of the sound system is taking place outside—that is clearly audible. Perhaps there is just one large roof raised on steel beams, without any sidewalls. But to reiterate: no closed space is being created here, either by the church, or by Aubry. The objective is to merge the soundscapes on all sides. Soon the babble of voices flows into the static and the soundcheck.

² With “Composition and Spatialization Practices” I am describing both Aubry’s modus operandi as well as the sound production of the players in his recording.

The Sound Corpus and the Corpus of Sound II

The sound conversion is not only a medium, it is the corpus itself. The sound is immaterial, just as belief is immaterial. Belief and sound are, however, always mediated materially. The significance of the acoustic mediation of faith becomes particularly evident in the technically mediatized practice. As paradoxical as it may appear, particularly belief and sound, as invisible objects, intrude into our lives through the multiple forms of our material culture (cf. Straw 2012: 227, 228):³ sound systems (ranging from large PA systems to car hi-fis), cassettes, CDs, DVDs, audio archives (private and public). In his audio performance Gilles Aubry renders audible forms of such mediatization and material amplification of belief.⁴

Coalescing with the singing, footsteps, and voices is the sound of car engines passing slowly by. Someone is chanting into a megaphone. Perhaps the megaphone is mounted on top of a car. Within a minute the sound artist is presenting us with various qualities of voice and his modes of documentation. Firstly, Aubry’s microphone picks up some voices, which are audio recordings (cassette?), being played back on some device. Then a voice speaks directly into the microphone. Evidently Aubry is interviewing someone. Having read a text on Aubry’s work, I’m aware that he has accompanied pastors from the New Pentecostal churches in Kinshasa. I assume a pastor is explaining the linguistic context to him. I can just hear something about “en allemand” and “magic.” Finally some pre-produced/recorded voices can be heard. A distorted-sounding sermon, a “hallelujah,” and a murmuring ripple through the congregation. An impassioned sermon to an audience who respond with equal urgency. Are these recordings from the pastor’s archive which he is commenting on? Is Aubry documenting a documentation?⁵

Signifying the City I

Or: Whose Urban Lo-Fi Soundscape?

When in 1977 Murray Schafer attempted to characterize soundscapes using the prefixes hi-fi or lo-fi this distinction still referred generally perhaps to the issue of the acoustic qualities of urban spaces in which discrete sounds can or cannot be discerned (ibid.: 43). Under Schafer’s analytical categories, lo-fi soundscapes are those in which all the sound symbols are either drowned out or merge with the post-

³ Reference sources marked with “cf.” should not imply a paraphrasing, but rather the associations of the author triggered by the cited sources.

⁴ Addendum by Gilles Aubry: due to the spatialization of the various sources I have in part really endeavored to deploy spatialization as an instrument for the spatial representation of the various kinds of sound documents: my own field recordings, church archives, film soundtracks, music, audio tracks from the mixing console. ... Here spatialization is not, as is usually the case, being used as an additional musical parameter or for the sake of realism ...

⁵ Addendum by Gilles Aubry: here I also find it interesting that the pastor is not simply commentating but translating: the confessions of the street kids who, during earlier campaigns, were accused of being witches before being liberated. In this sense the pastor is “playing” the role of the members/victims ...

industrial din and background noise of the machines and engines (ibid.: 71). During the course of the decades, the urban soundscapes and, above all, the awareness of the “technology and symbolism of sound” (Bijsterveld 2001) have been transformed. In European and North American cities it has become clear to diverse players and planners that even if every technological invention is accompanied by new sounds, at least the control over the noise has a (symbolic) significance. Or conversely, not controlling the sound of the technologies is vulgar (cf. ibid.: 61). Are the soundscapes we are listening to here, lo-fi? Are the audio productions really uncontrolled?

Some five minutes have elapsed since the start of the audio performance. Another change to the recording range: the humming of static as if someone were scanning the longwave band of a radio. It is the same humming we heard during the intro—only this time, however, there are interruptions and a change in tone-color. The shapes and the static migrate: radio, PA system, megaphone sound, guitar amplifier—everything is now being registered simultaneously. The guitar is still being tuned. The car engines are purring quietly. Someone—man or woman—is scoring a lambent guideline into the soundscape by tapping out a rapid rhythm against a bottle with a spoon or something similar.

Signifying the City II

With the hi-fi vs. lo-fi dualism still ringing in my ears, I listen to Gilles Aubry’s distorted and static-laden recording from Kinshasa. Not necessarily the production of the sound artist itself is distorted, but the players, whose sound practices he is recording, are supplying him at times with heavily distorted and static-laden original material. We are, of course, able to distinguish between the sonic urban soundscapes and arrive at the conclusion that Kinshasa is awash with the sound of crackling, banging, howling, and distortion. Old engine noises, be they from electricity generators or cars (the great age of the latter can be recognized from the characteristic hooting of their horns) reverberate through the streets. The PA systems, TVs, and radios blare out from the uninsulated houses, whereas in the Western metropolises intellectual resources have once again become available to reflect upon the *Tuned City* (Kleinlein et al. 2008), rather than noise reduction. High-tech trains begin their journeys in harmonic intervals of a third; their passengers sitting with closed headphones capable of transporting the cleanest trendy sub-basses, devoid of subculture.

A crowd of people has gathered. I estimate there to be some several hundred believers. Of course, I cannot know that it is a religious gathering, but my ears have been alerted by the announcement and the “Hallelujah” soundcheck. Occasionally a lone voice rises above the babble of voices engulfing me, although not one wishing to address the gathering, I sense. Everyone clearly has something to contribute. Initially I gain the impression that

this babble of voices is being generated by a dialogue between groups of people. To me it sounds like this myriad hum of voices is actually impacting on each and every individual who is perhaps praying, beseeching, proclaiming, and singing here. This sea of voices, tongues, and words also arouses in me the impulse to join in and give verbal expression to something. I could get something off my chest without being identified, yet it would still be heard, amplified, replicated, and mediatized. And just like my reflections in a cabinet of mirrors, it would be difficult to identify the original.

This is an achronistic narrative: once again the soundcheck is fed into the chorus of voices. I can’t tell whether this has been done by Aubry or occurred during the actual course of the gathering. This time the snare is being optimized—beat for beat. Or is it a hammer? Whatever the case, something is being struck repeatedly and, either way, these are constructions—sound and building. A few seconds later, it becomes clear that it was a soundcheck for the snare, because then it’s the turn of the tom-toms. For a few minutes, the acoustic mode of construction is transported into the composition. Although the church service is in full swing, the loudspeakers blare out the pastor’s message, replete with echo and distortion, into the area filled with people.

Composition and Spatialization Practices III

After having walked around during the first few minutes of the audio performance and attempted to gauge the size of the space which Aubry has created, I decide to take one of the chairs scattered around and sit down somewhere. It doesn’t matter where. Perhaps some sense of orientation is important and it is helpful to identify from which of the eight channels each sound is emanating, but sooner or later the signals flow into each other anyway—so the direction becomes meaningless. And besides, the orientation provided by the loudspeakers is both unrealistic and impossible.

The chairs placed there are white, so-called monoblocs, and they too partly serve as props for imagining a specific, different space (a terrace or an open-air service in Africa). Clustered and haphazardly stacked together, they allude only to their own materiality—without being presented in the manner of a “White Cube” exhibit.

The voice of the pastor is amplified electronically. He is preaching and admonishing. Although I cannot understand his language apart from the occasional interjection of “Hallelujah,” I know this to be the case. It is the incredible distortion, overdrive in his voice, which is exhorting me. The sound is unrelenting, and penetrates my ears with much greater intensity than mere portentous words. He screams into the microphone: “Hallelujah! Hallelujah, Hallelujah!” And the congregation responds with cries and ululations. “Hallelujah! Hallelujah, Hallelujah!” How should I express this unrelenting sound in text form? My inability to articulate the impact of this distorted materiality demonstrates the completely different level of experience generated by distortion—one which defies written description.

Distortion is Truth I

“Distortion is Truth” (Poss 1998). Distortion is perceived as enriching the sound (ibid.: 47). Distortion creates the charismatic sound, the enriched broadcast and charisma, the well-intended gift, which the charismatic movements have quite appropriated for themselves as a matter of course. The noise and distortion envelop everything with a patina, which also generates an aura (cf. Mersch 2004: 83). Static and distortion have always highlighted the mode of construction. It is obvious that charisma as a function of a characteristic sound and an act of speaking is culturally charged. Žižek contends that were it to be discovered that the charisma of the king is a performative effect of a symbolic ritual, a “fetishistic inversion” as it were, then the performative power (1997: 55) would be lost. Yet when the performative charge, however, is so obviously part of the symbolic ritual, what is there left to be revealed?

Distortion is not a failure but a (physical) enrichment. Non-linear distortion is, for example, an enrichment of the oscillations which comprise whole-number multiples of the fundamental frequency. Distortion enables new combinations of overtones to be generated which, in turn, create something like an “inherent pattern” (cf. Schloss 2004: 137). This results in the creation of sound shapes which, despite being “there,” are not actively played. And if I am focusing here on the technology, and appear to be avoiding religion and spirituality, then it is because of the rhetorical question which I posed in reference to Mark Hulsether (2005: 503): are religious sound practices (in the city) less or “more cultural than anything else”?

Fade-out here and fade-in to another soundtrack, a moderately distorting loudspeaker, and a more everyday setting can be heard. The cockcrow; followed a second later by another cockcrow. It is an acoustic symbol, which for me, briefly serves as a sound logo for Africa—in concert with the hooting of ancient car horns, the chirping of crickets, and the babble of voices. All that is missing are the strains of women singing to the pounding of cassava in the mortar—as the sound marker for Africa. For I learned this long ago: the rapper Pee Froiss from Senegal has dubbed the crowing of a cock into his intro on the track “Africa for Africans” (2004)—in the same way as Amadou and Mariam do on the track (“*La Fête Au Village*”) from their album *Dimanche a Bamako* (2004). But in the meantime Aubry’s *L’Amplification de Âmes* has hypersensitized me to something different, and recalibrated my hearing. I am actually waiting for the third cockcrow to once again prove acoustically the existence of Jesus and to expose Peter as a traitor.

Signifying the City III

Usually “Sonic Cityness” is equated with noise, polyphony, and cacophony, and also with polymetrics. Aubry’s *L’Amplification de Âmes* gives audible expression to the fact that religiously motivated sounds or religious motives can be isolated from the ostensible acoustic confusion of the city. Aubry records how the New Religious Movements are conquering the cities. His recordings capture the significance of the sound systems and amplification for New Religious Movements in making the sermons and deliverance audible across the city, beyond the walls of the location. Furthermore, the audio performance enables me as a listener to experience how the street-sound itself is an aesthetic foundation or effect of the New Religious Movements, that is, it is not only the street politics of the New Religious Movements which are at issue here, but the appropriation of the city and street aesthetics by the Religious Movement.

Once again the humming of an electrical device fills the air. Its surging crescendo evokes fear or anxiety—like an old horror-film score trick. I identify the source as a TV. Initially I hear another “unmotivated” soundscape from my immediate vicinity, namely the tweeting of birds. And cockcrows? Then I hear a through-composed soundscape. There is much shrieking. And amidst everything I am constantly hearing a cock crowing, the granular synthesis of the auditory grains of the cockcrow, probably mixed with something quite different. Woven into the filmic, intentionally arranged sound are excited, high-pitched human voices and a squealing. As if something is being slaughtered. The gaggle of voices softens again into French dialogue, which—and I’m convinced of this—derives from a film. From these panic-inducing filmic noises and voices, the piece switches to the spatial sound of a—loosely defined—“first-hand” recording. Somehow we are experiencing what at this juncture appears to be the climax of the gathering. Not in terms of the kinetic and tactile experience, but rather the sound source appears to indicate that we are approaching some sort of finale. During a Christian service peppered with the preacher’s cries of “hallelujah” and “Jesus” (probably) a woman’s voice can be heard, exclaiming, almost at shouting pitch, syllables rhythmically and extremely rapidly. It sounds like: “arrarrarue lurra, lurra, rrrattutu rattattut, allaloi, arrarrarue lurra, lurra, rrrattutu rattattut, allaloi allaloi” From a distance I gain the impression that the woman is likely to collapse sooner or later for lack of breath—as she enunciates the syllables in an endless torrent lasting several minutes. Everything bursts forth from her, as if evil spirits or demons were being exorcised.

From its rhythmical structure, I discern a deliverance, which I can only guess at. The person is chanting with a fervent zeal. It appears as if she is liberating herself from some dark spell cast upon her. With a complex periodicity, she acoustically shakes off the curse. And the pastor stands there, contributing: mollifying, yet animating, and offering praise to Him who shall bring redemption: “Gheee-Zusss.”

Within the call and response between the congregation and the pastor, there is a third voice / second microphone voice for the “Hallelujahs.” Voices rattle into the microphone—literally, because the pastor is firing off a “Ratatatata” like a machine-gun, and looping his words and phrases.

Composition and Spatialization Practices IV

In my opinion, Aubry does not over-exert himself in endeavoring to conjure an ecstatic experience for the audience during the possible climax of the performance. Perhaps he is deliberately creating distance. For the first time I have the impression that it is only a recording playing here, a recording in the sense that we are not hearing a composition, but merely the sounds captured by a microphone held out arbitrarily. No cuts, no multilayering, or hollow-sounding audio voyeurism between the eight loudspeaker channels in the HKW. Hitherto in the performance, virtually no audio recording has been allowed to play alone for so long. The so-called act of “deliverance” seems as if it has been simply thrown at my feet by Aubry: “Well now you have your *topos*. Or haven’t you been waiting all this time to encounter the Christian religion in Africa in this way?”⁶

I find the transition, the egress from this imaginary re-enactment through the association to the drum ‘n’ bass track “Cybergen” from a Guy Called Gerald. The title of the album flashes before my mind’s eye: *Black Secret Technology*. Once again Aubry offers me a gentle humming noise in which voices sound almost like radio messages from space. Sizzling and buzzing, mid-tone voices are switched on and off and on again—once more sounding like someone scanning the station dial of a radio, which can also receive extraterrestrial signals. Slowly and successively from out of this thunderous din, there emerges once again an earthly soundscape and human conversation.

Distortion is Truth II

“What is this Black in Black Sound?” (cf. Hall 1993). Only at this moment of the performance do I find a reference to “outaspace” and it would be much too imprecise and, at the same time, racist to subsume the sound events of *L’Amplification de Âmes* and the Afro-futuristic sound of more popular music together under the label of “black sound technology and aesthetics.” Perhaps there is a black desire

⁶ Addendum by Gilles Aubry: this passage is important. I am not an unmotivated bystander, nor am I only motivated by the music (or the dramaturgy), but by documentary considerations, focusing particularly on certain aspects: the voices, the bodies, the space, and the tension between the direct and the mediated sounds, i.e. on the elements which could be significant from a specifically cultural and media perspective. This “distance” may have something to do with the fact that the ceremony has been also recorded simultaneously directly from the mixing console (two-tracks), and on my own stereo microphone ... it is a synchronous juxtaposition of the “mixer perspective” and my own perspective ...

for distortion, which should be read as sonic and strategic positioning. If this is the case then it is to be taken as being highly diverse. The sound productions by the pastors in *L’Amplification de Âmes* differ in this respect to that, say, produced by the musicians of the Kasai Allstars or the group Konono No. 1, who also live in Kinshasa. However, there is an intentional production of static, distortion, and overdrive. One just has to observe how carefully and expertly the skin of the drum is glued together with a rubber-like substance for the performances of the Kasai Allstars and Group Konono No. 1 and how bat-wings are hung from its sound hole to ensure the drum vibrates perfectly. The drum crackles and buzzes with every beat, no matter how lightly it is struck—as if there were an electric short-circuit. These sound practices of the band or those of the preacher recorded by Aubry are very distinct from the numinous white desire for *stillness* in music and art contexts. As evidence of this white desire for stillness, Dieter Lesage and Ina Wudtke allude in their book, *Black Sound White Cube* (2010), to the flirtation with John Cage and his piece “4’ 33”” (ibid.: 59).

Until, finally, a more peaceful sermon is to be heard. This is amplified by a PA system over so many widely distributed loudspeakers that echos are generated due to the sound delay. Now I can believe: “This is how it really sounds.” Now I realize: the other recordings of the sermons heard previously must have, in part, been recorded somewhere within the amplification process itself. For they did not always allow this logical multisound and echo to be heard through the loudspeakers positioned around the large hall. The distorted sounds described were more direct. What is more real here?

Composition and Spatialization Practices V

Aubry is developing a material-based artistic form of analysis. This has a different connotation to the ethnographic “Thick Description.” It is a highly receptive, clearly audibly dense composition in the literal sense—layered, classified, augmented, compiled. The basic materials are perhaps both soundscape and field recordings, Aubry’s mode of composition cannot be equated with this. And here composing should not imply that Aubry imparts, for example, rhythmizing the audio material. The structure of the audio dubbing remains in every regard irregular, and ambient sounds are not excluded.

The echos of the sermon on the ground have something of the dub aesthetic about them. They sound ethereal. Yet the sound-texture remains earth-bound. There is no striving towards outaspace. Neither idiomatic nor idiosyncratic spaces can be heard. And acoustically one can also observe that Roy Wallis’s typology of the forms of the New Religious Movements is both reductionist and generally inapplicable here (1978: 6, 7). Wallis differentiates the various stances of the New Religious Movements

into “world affirming,” “world rejecting” and “world accommodating” (ibid.). The constructed soundscapes and the missionaries’ approach to technologies can be simultaneously described using all three categories.

Apropos authenticity: for the first time music-music can now be heard—drums, singing, and a rhythmical guideline is being clapped. However, Aubry does not allow me to slip into the groove or swing my hips to my African music cliché. Just four or five seconds later he plays this marker, and the humming and buzzing of the electrical equipment remain so present that it is obviously only a recording. This is no invitation into a different world; although children’s voices can be heard and once again music-music is being played; although incidental conversations are being conducted and it sounds as if someone is preparing a meal and frying something in the pan; and although there is a noise which sounds like an airplane or a helicopter flying from one loudspeaker to another. The humming gives way to a heavily distorted voice which I recognize: “Gheee-zuss.” An amplified call and response: “Gheee-zuss” and then another voice and voices: “... Gheee-zuss.” A sense of alarm: cars are hooting with frequent regularity. The speed of the exchanges between the pastor and the congregation grows in intensity. I hear the preacher shouting amidst the din: “Fire! Fire! Fire!” Everything is now only fuzz: engines humming, amplified voices. Fuzz, fuzz, fuzz.

In my judgment, the acoustic climax only takes place now—a few minutes after the deliverance. In the meantime, some twenty minutes have elapsed. At this juncture Aubry’s concert is an “extreme distortion performance.” The pastors are virtually experimenting with distortion. It sounds as if they are holding the microphone not in front of their mouths, but in their mouths. “Uaaarrgghh,” there is feedback: performative-distortion-feedback-excess.

Distortion is Truth III

It is a proven sonic fact: if you want the signal to burn, then use a distorter. If you want to animate people to run out, if you want to inspire people to rapid transformation and to spread the gospel, then do not use a laidback, saturated sonorous sound texture. The latter only works when—as in the morning devotion on *Deutschlandradio*—the aim is to incite a deep emotional response. Amplification, distortion, and echos are co-composers. They dynamize, replicate, and complete the motivational ideas to form a holistic entity (cf. Maierhof 2005: 132, 136).

The sound marker for the gathering comes from horn loudspeakers. In physical terms, horn loudspeakers possess a strong directional character, culturally speaking, they arouse alarm. With the megaphone one always addresses the broad masses. Hi-fi is something for the living room with a couch.

There is an air of alarm, or to be more exact: a sense of emotional alarm is being intentionally produced—by the preachers and by Gilles Aubry. It is obvious that it is not a warning of earthly fire, but an intellectual, spiritual slash-and-burn. Aubry dubs various distorted tracks over each other which radiate from various directions. Perhaps it is the wind which is making the microphone membrane flutter. I hear an image such as *Christ Carrying the Cross* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, in which the people appear to moving very quickly, scattering apart, and in which a storm is brewing.

Fade out. An impossible finale—simply allowing these streams of sound to melt away into a tranquil space—one which conjures in me the image of someone sitting in front of his house playing a mellow hip-hop beat at walking tempo—for himself and for others. Even if he has only put on a cassette or a CD, he/she is the owner of this music and the performer. I feel as if I am on the road with Gilles Aubry. He is making his recordings and asking the owner the name of the group. It is the first time in this HKW performance that Aubry has taken me to an unknown place. It is a place, in which I can even hear the very step on which the owner of the music is sitting. I glean this from the fact that edited soundscapes are no longer being presented, but instead Aubry is correlating his questions on music with the hook lines of the tunes. He asks during a pause. At this moment we are in this soundscape.

Signifying the City IV

Distortion is Truth IV

The sub-complex characterization of a post-colonial urban ambiance as a lo-fi soundscape has something “victimizing” about it. For the categorization appears as a chronology orientated towards the level of technical development. That which perhaps (with good intentions) is prematurely perceived as a lo-fi soundscape, can and should, be read as an autonomous sound concept in which noise and distortion serve as the aesthetic devices.⁷

In their chronological perception, these pieces of humming equipment sound like a legacy from hi-fi cultures. But they are not simply a post-colonial or a symptom of post-Christianization. From Gilles Aubry’s audio performance, in contrast, I hear distortion as an aesthetic or deliberately conceived practice intended to reduce the soundsppheres of Kinshasa to more than a tragedy of colonialism.

I need this music-music, this hip-hop beat as a respite from my own associations in order to forge a real presence. Throughout the entire composition this “canned” beat serves as a

⁷ My aesthetization of distortion in *L’Amplification de Âmes* should not, however, be romanticized—as is the case with distortion in punk music—nor glorified nostalgically as an expression of rebellion. Neither is it to be confused with campy lo-fi deluxe concepts, the “Aesthetics of Failure” (Cascone 2002), nor the cuts, clicks, and glitches of popular music production to denote an anti- or pseudo- stance (Jauck 2010: 209, 210).

kind of bridge. It forms a transition to the theme of the production, which can be summarized and repeated as follows: soundcheck, soft humming of equipment.

Someone is singing something to himself in a comical falsetto. Someone else is playing a slide guitar into a gigantic artificial echo-chamber, or into the open air. It is not a song, or a structured composition, but the strumming on the cliché of a Hawaiian guitar—truly an overdose of the “Other.” In his audio performance, has Aubry granted any other audio-track such free range as this risible strumming on a slide guitar or steel-pedal guitar, or the track with the guy singing happily to himself? The theme introduced at the outset is now reprised: “A! All! ... Gheezuss, Jesus. A! All! A.”⁸

Signifying the City V

(New) Religious Movements and their acoustic occupation of space in the city can be read as a soundcheck. The interaction between city, religion, and sound cannot only be loudly and regularly heard—as in the form of bell-ringing, the cries of the muezzin, or parades. An internal texture of references with aesthetic symbols functions like a stress test (Eco 1972: 154, 166). If sound symbols are initially understood as empty or indeterminate entities, then there are various groups in the city who show an interest in freighting it with meaning, codifying or religiously re-codifying it. Everything can then be related to the omnipresence of God. The appropriation of space is not only accomplished through the cry for “Gheee-Zuss” ringing out across the entire city; the tuning of a guitar and distortion can also be charged with meaning. Just as the bread, the wine, and the special acoustics on the Mount of Olives evoke associations with “Jesus.” It is, of course, particularly effective to infer meaning from the ubiquitous noise. Therefore, if the impact of the (New) Religious Movements on urban soundscapes is at issue here, then it is not only concerned with hearing how missionizing is conducted, but also with how faith is inverted into every invisible materiality. The cock again becomes the admonisher,⁹ the horror video a proof of the evil stalking us at every turn.

The composition itself illustrates once again its narrative structure: preparation; arrival of the guests; service; preparation for the next time. I am being prepared for an end to this narrative by the removal of its intensity, and by being reminded once again of the tranquil humming of the intro.

The soundcheck, the humming of the equipment, and the slide guitar meld into the everyday noises and conversations. Someone is scrubbing something, a choir is singing softly in the background. It sounds like a rehearsal. I listen to the quotidian theme: preparations. Things are being washed and wrung dry. Water splashed. The guitar is being tuned again

⁸ Addendum by Gilles Aubry: please note that I recorded the vocals and the slide guitar during the long and impromptu soundchecks ... as I had the feeling that the musicians had the room for a time to play music “just for themselves” ...

⁹ cf. the unpublished degree thesis by Constanze Trieder (2013).

E A D G b b e. Perhaps there is some sports event on the TV, as one can just make out the roar of cheering spectators as if in a stadium. Perhaps this is also a recording of some massive Christian gathering. Be that as it may, there is no soundscape which I don’t hear as being religious. Birds twitter, chickens cackle. Minutes pass. The humming of static gives way to a bourdon tone, a specific tone. Mortars are pounded in preparation of the meal. Far into the background we hear again a short, distorted, preacher’s exclamation of ecstasy through the loudspeakers. At its center remains the tone—literally a tonic, which is sustained until the end.¹⁰

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY JOHN RAYNER

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¹⁰ Addendum by Gilles Aubry: a fundamental tone, yes, an “electric earth-tone” even (50 Hz).