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Karel, Ernst; Larcher, Jonathan; Wilenius, Heikki

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A Conversation on Discarded Recordings

Ernst Karel, Jonathan Larcher, Heikki Wilenius

Introduction

What can be considered as a discarded recording in an ethnographic inquiry? Do the instabilities and technical errors show that technology is really part of the encounter of ethnographic situations? Furthermore, is there a limit beyond which a sound that is too degraded can no longer be restored but simply described in writing, the preferred medium of the human sciences in general and anthropology in particular? These three ideas were at the center of the EASA Lab "Rubbish, Noise, Experimentation: New Afterlives of Field Recordings,"[1] as we have written in the "Introduction: Exploring the Phenomenon of Sonic Waste in Anthropology" to this special issue.

Since we did not bring our own sound excerpts to this Lab meeting in July 2020, we organized another meeting in March 2022 so that we could continue our conversation around the discarded recordings of ethnography, this time with sounds selected by ourselves, starting with the film *Expedition Content* (2020) made by Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati from the sound archives of the Harvard-Peabody expedition (1961) in Dutch New Guinea. The recordings made by Michael Rockefeller give voice to the world of the Hubula of West Papua and, at a second level of listening, composes a sonic counterpart to Robert Gardner's film *Dead Birds* (1964), a classic of visual anthropology made during this expedition. Initially conceived exclusively as a sound piece, before becoming a film, *Expedition Content* gives back a sonic presence to the bodies of men, women, and children presented in Gardner's film, while opening attention to all the elements and living beings encountered during the expedition. The contrast with *Dead Birds* is sharp, as the latter is built around the cycle of death, inter-tribal wars, and Gardner's voice-over. The many errors and failures that punctuate Rockefeller's recordings – we also listened to some recordings that did not appear in *Expedition Content* – form a fertile ground for thinking about the tactics and listening that can make examining ethnographic rubbish a heuristic, both for the history of the anthropological discipline and for the history of the place where it was recorded.

We also listened to recordings with various technical defects made by Jonathan Larcher during his fieldwork in Romania in 2007 and 2008 and a badly distorted smartphone recording made by Heikki Wilenius during his fieldwork in Indonesia in 2013. By listening to and discussing these sound recordings, the conversation[2] was extended to the techniques and methods by which these technical errors, silences or saturated sounds can be recycled and made to contribute to the production of anthropological knowledge.

Neither Good Nor Bad Sounds

Jonathan Larcher: Ernst, maybe we can start with the interview you and Veronika Kusumaryati gave for the Open City Documentary Festival in July 2020 (Applewhaite 2020). You were talking about an audio artifact in the first sequence of *Expedition Content*. I want to come back to two things you said. The first one is when you say

that there are "neither good nor bad sounds." It's pretty much on our topic. And the second one is about playing with these artifacts, emphasizing them, as you "never 'cleaned up' the audio." I understood from the beginning of the film that I will hear all these artifacts and materiality of the sound recordings. The "point of audition" (Chion [1990] 1994: 89) being not only Michael Rockefeller, the recordist, but first, and foremost, the microphones.

Ernst Karel: In the context of rubbish, and whether sounds are good or bad, whether recordings are good or bad, it's not that we *didn't* include the recordings that were rubbish or compromised in some way. On the contrary, in a way, that's what we *were* looking to include in the piece: those recordings that revealed the hand of the recordist, that revealed the interaction that Michael has recorded but tried to obscure. He was interested, of course, in a kind of transparent approach to location recording, like: "This is the world, and I'm just recording the world, and I'm not really here." But what comes through over and over again, listening to the original tapes, is everything else. It is the sound of the machine, his interactions with people, his frustrations with people. There's the section of the film where he's verbalizing his exasperation with the people around him. It seems like what's going on is – and he mentions this in his tape journal – he's trying to record something that's going on a little distance away, and the people who are near him keep talking, "ruining" his recording. And he gets to the point where he actually shushes them. It's quite remarkable. And it says a lot about not just the recording process but also about his intentions, his goals as a recordist. But what's also coming through a little bit is his own social status. I mean, he's this extremely high-status individual in his own culture. And he comes to this place, and he's not anymore. I mean, he is, of course, still, a member of the colonial expedition, but he's not at all treated with the kind of deference that he's probably used to being treated with in his normal life [laughing]. I mean, that's just one example of what we were looking for, in terms of when the recordings failed, or when there were these moments of revealing what's going on in the whole recording process.

Heikki Wilenius: When listening to it, I was wondering about all the different perspectives one can take regarding the "rubbishness" of the recordings. And you mix it into the narrative really nicely when – I think it's about three minutes into the film – there is this discussion about the objectives of the expedition, or at least the naturalist objectives informing the work of documentation. And I suppose Michael also shared this ideal, shushing the people around him. He wanted to purify the recordings into a single layer. But as you mentioned, it's actually very interesting when there are many layers, and you can distinguish them all, and a soundscape opens up. But I was also thinking that I can't dub this "rubbish" in any sense of the word, because I just love the analog artifacts that are present there. [Ernst agrees.] Of course, it's just a historic contingency that many people are fans of these kinds of artifacts. Maybe, 50 years from now, these bits will sound terrible to people. But listening to this today, I was thinking in which context we can equate rubbish with noise, or with unintended sound artifacts, and in which instances and contexts we can't. It is also about questioning the analytic usefulness of the concept of rubbish. In a way, you and Veronika Kusumaryati are embracing the rubbish of Michael Rockefeller, but, again, to my ears, there is no rubbish. In your work, both the aesthetic approach and the representative approach – becoming a decolonial critique – flip everything over; it's quite fascinating.

EK: Yeah, I think that happens with some of your recordings that we'll talk about too. Like the idea that the distortion in one of Jonathan's recordings, the distortion on the mic – or this is maybe a kind of saturation of the mic. It's not clipping, but it's like, the saturation on the mic of this incredibly loud, amplified music *actually gives us more of the sense of*, the feel of the thing then it would have been like with a nice clean recording, in some sense. *Rubbish to whom* is the main question. And then in the editing of *Dead Birds*, the Robert Gardner film that these recordings were nominally being made for, most of those moments would have not been appropriate at all, obviously. In fact, it seems as if *Dead Birds* uses very little of Michael's recordings, partially because it's just wall to wall narration; it's just Gardner's voice. But, the rubbish, like the sounds of analog tape, which we liked so much, wouldn't have been what they would have liked to have at the time, right. So yeah,

we're looking back from this historical moment and wanting to hear all of those artifacts, and that tells us so much about the overall event, but not at the time.

HW: It also laces the whole thing with nostalgia, I don't know, what could one call it? Perhaps "terrible nostalgia," because it's intertwined with all the social context. But I felt torn in two different directions when listening to it, because there are pleasing and interesting aspects of the sound, and then there's the tragic history of West Papua ringing in the background also. So, it was a very powerful experience for me.

Silence as Rubbish

JL: There is another question about a small part of the film you highlighted in the transcript.[3] It is the part with the blank tape. Because, obviously, when we thought about rubbish, at the beginning, for the 2020 Lab, we immediately thought about noise – it was actually even in the name of the lab. *But what about silence as actually rubbish?* It is not quite pure silence, there is a "sound of technology" (Birtwistle 2010) for less than one minute, I think. But when you encountered these silences in the archives, how did you feel? Was it a bad sound, a good sound, or only rubbish, and to what extent?

EK: Yes, I do often think of that. It's interesting you ask it that way because when I hear that part I think about the first time I heard it. So, before that silence, Michael Rockefeller announces:

Cut one of this tape was supposed to have been drinking water. However the tape as it turned out was not against the recording head. Therefore cut number 1 will be, sounds of men digging in the garden. The first cut, quite a while from now after a space of blank tape, will be Walimo and Walewe singing as they dig in the garden. (Michael Rockefeller audio archive)

So it's because he didn't operate the machinery correctly. And then, it just plays out. The first time I heard it, I really just had this visceral sense of the way that time gets turned into a length of tape. Just that. What we're hearing now is actually that very length of tape, that represents that amount of time. We actually left that intact, so that is the actual length of the blank tape that's on the tape, at that moment. We didn't make any decision that it should be longer or shorter, or anything like that. Nothing profound, really. But that was this sort of physicalization of time. We're listening to this thing that something was happening, but because the recording head was not against the tape, there's no record of it. And so just hearing the natural noise of the tape, and those occasional pops or whatever they are, are there for whatever reason. And thinking of the archivists, thinking: "Okay, we're just letting the tape roll." And that's what they did.

JL: Sure, for archivists a blank tape is not rubbish. Because they are part of the things that you just keep and preserve. And probably there is, for the archivists, this deep love for the hiss of the magnetic tape. Right? [laughing].

EK: I think others have written about this too. Micah Silver has written a small book called *Figures in Air* (2014), where he distinguishes between sound and audio and talks about the studio as a place for composing

durations. It really underscores this idea of a recording as principally a duration. So that was also coming to my mind when I heard this: it is just the duration of audio with nothing being represented there.

HW: There's something koan-like to it.

EK: It reminds me of something Morton Feldman said, that composers have only two things to work with: time and sound, and that sometimes he's not even so sure about sound [laughter]. But that kind of duration of the blank tape going by is a moment of recorded time. It's a pause. It's simply a duration. [long pause and laughter]

Audio as a Secondary Matter in Dead Birds

JL: Maybe because I saw the film in 2020, during the Ciné du Réel online screening, I didn't register the subtlety of the passage when Eliot Elisofon asked Michael, "Are you recording?" And the same Elisofon said later on: "I don't know, I don't trust you." For me, there were multiple layers. But one thing that was quite interesting is that it forms an echo to the passage when Michael was recording the rain, and Peter Matthiessen called Michael from far, and Michael responded with a certain annoyance in his voice: "Don't you see I am recording the rain!" All of these interactions and relationships to the recording device indicated that audio was probably the least considered of the collected materials. Out of everything, sound was the one that could most easily be considered inconsequential. What was your impression of the status of sound, not as rubbish put perhaps as a secondary matter of concern? I can imagine a competition between his recordings and the camera; we can hear, on several occasions, the camera noise in one of the excerpts you sent to us. And it looks like there is no coordination between the two.

EK: Yeah, that's interesting, especially given the relative egos involved. Robert Gardner, of course, is known for having a pretty big ego. He organized the whole expedition, and for him the whole expedition was all about him and all about the film. Of course, the audio is meant to support that, but when he's shooting film, he's obviously going to be concerned only with that. But in a way, it was also sort of built in: audio recording really cannot happen at the same time as filming, just because the camera makes so much noise. And those moments when the audio recording is happening at the same time, that audio is therefore not usable, because the camera is running. So he has to have this whole other way of working. There has to be this kind of collaboration with the camera, but also avoiding the camera at the same time. So that led to a style of recording which is very unusual. Essentially, it made him become more like a contemporary field recordist: "I'm just looking for interesting sounds, I'm just trying to record various aspects of life, independent of the camera." So it's really a different way of thinking about recording sound for film than what we usually have. But then there is that occasion when Peter Matheson interrupts him while he's recording the thunderstorm that you mentioned. In fairness for Peter, he probably didn't even see that he was recording – he was calling from a distance. But that moment is so funny for me, because you can hear the indignation in Michael's voice. He really rebukes Peter for interrupting him. But then after a long pause, he continues: "I guess they're over there," or whatever [laughing]. But there are these moments when Michael's own social status comes to the foreground. I feel like it's there in his accent, in the way he says, "Peter!" And Peter is older than him, he's more senior, a known writer, and so on. So, in a certain way, he's socially senior to Michael, you know, but obviously, he's not a Rockefeller [laughing].

JL: I was also listening to Expedition Content as a revenge on the visual part of Dead Birds, because, actually, the only images we see are visual rubbish, right? When the camera gets jammed, it's typically the kind of footage that will be considered as rubbish. So it kind of counterbalances the idea that, maybe at the time, for the team, the sound was in the background and secondary in comparison to the images. This sequence is not

just a visual cue to acknowledge that there was also a film shooting. This is visual rubbish and the sound is now in the foreground.

EK: I hadn't thought of that visual footage as rubbish, but it's true. Before we had decided that there wouldn't be any image at all, that it was just a sound piece, the "bat cave" and that footage was actually mentioned in the audio. The voice of the radio operator – it's barely understandable – is talking about this footage being scratched. And they sent it to Rochester, the headquarters of Kodak. Then we realized we had that footage of what was being referred to in the audio. So, it's exactly like rubbish; it wouldn't have been used. But that was why we thought it was so beautiful, with that beautiful blue scratch that goes through it and the fact that it provides an image but doesn't do what we want images to do. It doesn't actually give us any information really about the place or what the people look like. Because we wanted the emphasis to be on sound, we didn't want to actually have the images, but with this [visual material], the issues we were trying to avoid by not having an image were avoided.

Ideological Matters Surfacing From Rubbish

HW: There was this peculiar intimacy to the way he whispers to the recorder – it's almost like a diary. He's talking to himself, and I suppose in a way he was, because it was intended as a note-keeping device. I kept wondering what kind of audience he envisioned for these recordings, and maybe you can shed some light on this. But it's hard for me to imagine his recordings supporting other media products. Also, I didn't really get the sense that he had an ethnographic or ethnological passion for recording this exact cultural setting. Perhaps it was more about documenting interesting sounds.

EK: Well, we don't have a record of what the conversations were about sound recordings. There's that amazing conversation about photography at the beginning.[4] And that itself survived, speaking of rubbish, only because they reused that tape and recorded over it. And then the tape stops, and you hear that conversation. It's actually backwards on the tape because they're reusing it [laughing]. The archivist had the presence of mind to flip the tape and transfer it. Maybe Michael was just practicing recording, and they didn't need to record this photography lesson. I don't know. But, that itself is just literally taken out of the rubbish.

HW: That's fascinating.

EK: The tape actually stops at that moment where we cut it, when Gardner says: "Not exactly" [laughter]. He was about, probably, to continue to say something about his ideas about "naturalism" and making a film for scientific purposes, and so on. It would have been amazing to know what his thoughts were at that early moment in his career – but we don't have it.

HW: It's wonderful that, from this rubbish, discursive things surfaced – like the ideological presuppositions they had when doing that work. Amazing.

EK: Clearly, Gardner already has ideas about "naturalism," and so he's disagreeing with Elisofon, the *Life magazine* photographer, who was already famous at that time. And so he's about to disagree that it should be some kind of objective representation, that there's no poetry to it, no subjectivity to it, and that's clear, in Gardner's whole career, with projecting his own issues onto a place or a people. But the extent to which

Michael Rockefeller has these things in mind, one imagines probably not. He's probably got a more literal view, just trying to make good recordings. I mean, he's only 22 years old. He's also probably more interested in photography than sound recording himself. But he seems to enjoy it, the sound recording. When Veronika [Kusumaryati] was listening to the tapes with Nicolaus Lokobal, the West Papuan anthropologist, and Korneles Siep, the West Papuan musician, they had an affection for Michael. When they listened to him on the tapes, they liked him. So that was nice to hear, because, when I listened to it, I didn't have that experience. Of course, he does seem to have learnt a fair bit of Hubula language, not so much in what we selected in the piece, but you hear back and forth a little bit elsewhere in the tapes. But they felt like he was a friendly young person.

HW: I can relate to that: if you cut off the American social context, and disregard the moments of racializing language and implied sexual violence that emerge in the latter part of the piece, there is a voice that sounds pleasing. I noticed that he seemed reasonably fluent considering he had only been there for a couple of months. Do you know if they took language studies before?

EK: Just a little bit, it seems.

HW: Yeah, so that meant that they hadn't just been drinking by themselves in front of their tent all night. So they had actually been curious about people there.

From Rubbish to Archaeological Treasure

JL: Regarding the transcript, the wind is a major reason for failure; it's a problem, on many occasions. So, what was your experience, actually, of these wind recordings? Are they really unsuccessful? How did you relate to them?

EK: You mean in all the material? [pause] You know, I'm not sure. Again, like we were talking about earlier, the way I'm listening to the recordings is not the same way Michael would have been listening to them or the same way that Gardner would have listened to them. And speaking also back to the audience for whom Michael is announcing the tapes – I think, first of all, himself – I think he also realizes he's part of a team, and other people may be listening to these too or go through the recordings later after the expedition, and so on. I think he's aware that it's not private. He's making these announcements as a way of logging the material. So, when they would have listened to it at the time, probably the wind would have been too much and wouldn't have worked for the film. But when I was listening to it, I didn't have that frame of mind. So that's why I'm actually not even sure how bad the wind was – whether or not it rendered the recordings a failure. Because for me it always just sounded so interesting, and was such evidence of his inexperience, of the microphone in his hand, of whatever kind of wind protection they had. Apparently, he had some wind protection, and whenever there was explicit reference to these kinds of things, often those made it into the edit. I was interested in those moments when he talks about the technique or the practice of field recording. So, for example, he's recording a swarm of bees, and he says: "Okay, the same thing except now with a windscreen." I don't know if that meant a sock or what, as the recording is not that different, but it is a bit muffled. They didn't have a Rycote, you know, or a blimp or something like what we have now where it's acoustically transparent and actually protects against the wind.

HW: Somebody mentioned that he put the microphone under his coat.

EK: Right. So in my listening, the wind added to the quality of the recording rather than made it a failure. [pause] The wind was definitely present a lot of the time. I think, in simple terms, a lot of the recordings were ruined by wind [laughs]. For our purposes of listening and being interested in it, they weren't ruined, you know; it's just a quality, an extra quality.

HW: I think we've established so far that all of those recordings we consider quite unequivocally to be a kind of archaeological treasure. What does it take for rubbish to become this kind of treasure? Is it just a historical contingency, or simply a sufficient passage of time? Do you have any thoughts on that?

EK: I'd be interested in both of your thoughts on that. I think these things are changing, given the proliferation of recordings. Part of the reason these are treasures is because it's unusual for the time. And in this case, in particular, and very specifically, this moment in the history of West Papua, the history of colonialism, the history of the idea of an anthropological expedition, the history of the development of visual anthropology. So all of those things, in particular, focus a lens on this moment. Whereas now, with our recordings that the three of us make, we're part of millions of people all making recordings digitally and so on, and it's unlikely that any of them will be such a special treasure to someone 60 or 100 years from now. With *Expedition Content*, it always just boggles my mind, what an important turning point this was in so many different ways, in particular for the people of West Papua, as they were about to lose what self-determination they had under Dutch colonial rule. It was not a good situation. Gardner writes in his journal about hearing gunshots, and we know that Dutch colonial officers just ruled with impunity and were brutal, like colonial officers everywhere. But things got much worse for them with the handing over of their country from the Netherlands to Indonesia. And they were betrayed by the United Nations and the US and every other country in that process. Korneles Siep has done some public conversations with us in the last couple of years, and he has talked about how this disappearance of Michael Rockefeller is not just a kind of historical oddity, not just a little bit of extra drama in this. Since it was an international event, it was all over the newspapers, and his father was the governor of New York and future vice president. There were well-publicized searches. [pause] So that itself played a role in public perception of West Papua and how "primitive" the place was, how they needed to be governed. All this stuff was brought up and made into an international issue because of Michael Rockefeller, and not in a good way. West Papuans were portrayed as savages. I mean, Gardner continued to refer to them as a stone age society. And so, of course, there was no question of self-determination for them. They had to be handed over to another responsible party, and this brings us to the United Nations and the so-called New York agreement of August, 1962. So, in the horrific, drunken "party scene" near the end of the film, they describe this kind of New York geography with jazz clubs and so on. So all these references to New York for us also refer in a way to the New York Agreement. And that was because the UN meeting was held in New York, where the determination was made that Indonesia would take over West Papua, and the UN basically gave their blessing to that. And the UN still does not recognize that West Papua is officially a colonized territory. For Korneles Siep, it's not just a side note to history, it's a central event in the entire fate of the country.

HW: Yeah, that's very interesting. It was a very specific conjuncture in all these historical progressions. This guy just happened to be there. I have no idea about the reception history of these recordings, but I suppose that their value as ethnographic evidence was established fairly quickly, even though perhaps this historical conjuncture was not understood yet. What kind of historical process do we need to go through before rubbish – the margins of these recordings – become of interest? That's also perhaps too tall an order for us to try to answer tonight. But that's what I'm interested in. I wonder if that has something to do with the historical structure that you just described.

EK: The recordings themselves haven't really been out there. So, in a way this film is the first way that they're being heard publicly. But we are working with Korneles Siep and others – Veronica and I are coordinating an introduction between two West Papuan museums and the Peabody to make sure the digital archive is shared. It's not happening via us; the Peabody wants to work directly with an institution in West Papua. The idea would be that the whole archive will be available not just raw, but with structure and some organization and translations and things like that. That's still in progress.

HW: How did you stumble on them, then?

EK: The tapes were donated by Michael's surviving twin sister, in 2005 or 2006. I just found out about them in 2015, which was a year after Gardner died, when an assistant who was working with his estate contacted me because they were finishing these short films that he and various assistants had been working on that were using unused footage from that expedition. She asked if I would be interested in helping to make audio soundtracks for the films – and here's the archive to do it with. And I was like: "Whoa!" [laughing] So I had no idea that it existed. That's how I found out about it. And I did do that project, and DER (Documentary Educational Resources), will publish the short films. But, then I shared them with Veronika Kusumaryati right away, because she works in West Papua as a media anthropologist. We knew that we wanted to do something with the audio. And so there's actually three parts: one is *Expedition Content*; the other is the whole archive and making sure that's kind of shared and repatriated, and so on; and the third part is that, in collaboration with the musician Korneles Siep, we are collecting highlights from the many musical-type recordings and trying to publish them as CDs, or the equivalent of CDs in this post-CD era of music distribution.

Useful at the Moment: Recordings Around the Ethnographic Inquiry

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JL: I was also curious about the recordings of the radio operator. Because it's obviously not really for the purpose of the inquiry. Do you know if they had a way to actually listen to what they were recording on site? Would this sound have been just a kind of memorandum for the team?

EK: I guess so. They certainly had what was needed to listen back to the tape on the headphones. And he was doing that in the tent. He would be in the tent, recording new introductions to the things that he had recorded, so a lot of listening-back was happening in the field. Sometimes you'll hear rain on the tent, on those parts that are spliced in and where he's saying: "Cut number one will be …" or whatever. So I was wondering about that. My guess is that maybe because the radio operator is difficult to understand, they would record it and then could listen back to double-check their understanding, maybe as a safety. Or maybe for other people who couldn't be there at the time, as you just said, maybe that's another reason.

JL: Yeah, to my ears, it was really like the kind of notes you make on site, during your fieldwork. It's not part of the inquiry, you just need to keep a record, for the money, for instance, really at the border of the inquiry or the shooting. These things, from the perspective of ethnography, are pure rubbish; there is absolutely no use to put that in the transcript.

EK: It is a great point that you make, Jonathan, about that material being, in a way, only useful at the moment, but not as part of the overall project. It is utility stuff that becomes rubbish. Just like radio transmission itself: you only need to hear it once, and then you don't need it anymore.

JL: And we have, as ethnographers, or at least I have, a lot of these recordings, just to have the information in the moment or on demand.

The Heuristics of Repetitive Listening

HW: I have been thinking about listening patterns and habits during our discussions around the topic of sound and rubbish. In David Toop's book, *Ocean of sound* (2001), there's an anecdote on Brian Eno, who makes a random recording of city noise in London, and then he gets this idea of taking a small snippet, around three minutes long, and listening to it on repeat, until he knows it by heart, understands every little nuance of the recording, as if learning a piece of music. Eno says that a structure emerges, a structure that wasn't there before. So, according to him, the sounds get augmented. In the credits of *Expedition Content* you described your role as composers of an augmented sound piece. So, this is just my convoluted way of asking if, by focusing on the rubbish aspects of sound recordings, can we think of a similar process emerging? Because Eno claimed that this changed his approach to recordings, he listened to everything in a different way after this exercise. Could we make a similar move regarding anthropologists' attitude to field recordings by switching the focus like that? Because it was very tedious when I was listening to my own recording I wrote about for this *Journal of Sonic Studies* issue. It's a 15-minute smartphone recording, and it's very taxing to listen to. There's this distortion from the poor microphone. But all these fascinating layers emerged there, after torturing my ear long enough.

EK: That's a wonderful exercise. Too often, there's a common attitude to sound recording that it is simply a representation of a sound, you know, and that the recording itself, or the qualities of the audio itself are meant to be kind of ignored, and you somehow get through it just to the sound that's being represented there. The exercise that you're describing here is about understanding the whole texture of the sound recording. This is where the distinction that Micah Silver (2014) makes, that I mentioned earlier, between audio and sound is so useful, where the term audio is reserved for intentionally produced sound. For example a recording played back through speakers is audio, while the sound that I'm hearing out and about is sound. When they listen to a recording, people, anthropologists, and everyone else are trying to hear sound, and they're not really listening to the audio. You know what I mean? This mistaken idea, in my view, the acousmatic idea that we're listening to the sound without seeing the source of the sound, is missing this whole point of what audio is. No, we're hearing audio, that is referring somehow to a sound. It is not the sound without seeing the source of the sound; that's not at all what's happening. We're hearing audio, and somehow, and this is where it's mysterious, there's a semiotic process that enables some idea of something that was recorded to come into our mind. And it happens because we're listening to this audio, and it somehow reminds us through this combination of iconicity, memory, and indexicality, all these things coming together, so even if we haven't experienced or recorded the scene, we can have a mental image of what it might have been. It is not because that sound is presenting itself – it's happening in our mind because of the audio that is happening in this room. So, focusing on that level of audio, like what Brian Eno is doing, and what you're doing, Heikki, when listening to your piece, over and over again, you appreciate it in a whole new way. And it becomes less about what it refers to and more about the structure of the audio itself.

HW: Yeah, if we compare visual culture and aural culture – from the perspective of visual culture, even in anthropology, the mainstream attitude to sound or sound recordings is quite naive. It is lagging behind because of the semiotic ideology of anthropology: sound hasn't been sufficiently reflected on.

EK: I think you're right.

The Multimodal Turn in Visual Anthropology

JL: Looking at the long list of films you have been working on, I have the impression that a lot of them are actually departing from visual anthropology to multimodal anthropology. There have been some texts about this turn in the *American Anthropologist*, with a first text (Gerald Collins, Durington, and Gil 2017) and a second one (Takaragawa, Smith, Hennessy, Alvarez Astacio, Chio 2019), written as a response by several members of the Terminalia collective. But there are more manifestos, rather than precise genealogies, of how multimodal anthropology emerged from visual anthropology. There are three films that, for me (Larcher 2022), really bring the multimodal in a practical way to the conversation: *Voices of the Rainforest* (2019) by Steven Feld; *Zawawa: The Sound of Sugarcane in the Wind* (2017) by Rupert Cox, Angus Carlyle, Kozo Hiramatsu, and Atsushi Nishimura; and, lastly, *Expedition Content*. Because, for all three of them, the description of the environment is made first by the sounds and after that by the images. Steven Feld's film is all edited as a playback film-concert, so the description of the environment is in the soundtrack first, and then there are the images. Rupert Cox and Angus Carlyle describe the history of the environment through sounds. And of course, *Expedition Content*, for all the reasons we mentioned. These are turning points in the way to compose a film through audio, each of the films proposing a different way.

HW: My anthropological education didn't cover a lot of visual, oral, and aural aspects of culture and social life. I remember that the only book I read during my master's education mentioning recording techniques or their analytic possibilities was Alessandro Duranti's *Linguistic Anthropology*, with a chapter in which he argues for the superior possibilities of multimodal ethnographic materials (Duranti 1997: 113–115). So, I was thinking that, before this conversation, we would bring three quite different positions into this discussion. Ernst, you are an anthropologist specializing in sound; Jonathan, you are a media anthropologist; and I'm a political anthropologist who might be described as media and sound curious. But as you described, Jonathan, the focus on multimodality in anthropology is a very recent development. It's actually quite surprising, considering the age of these technologies. There has been a certain naivete, or can we say naturalism, like in the discussion at the beginning of *Expedition Content*, in anthropology's relationship to media. I was certainly taught to treat fieldwork recordings as evidence of a context, if not of speaker intentions.

EK: You're referring to the conversation that begins the film, what we call the "photography lesson" with Eliot Elisofon. That conversation stuck out to us so much when we first heard it: he articulates this idea of "making a film for scientific purposes," and that it should follow "naturalism, if we could use that word." There seems to be so much continuity with how people are still thinking about it, which is almost comical. But I totally agree with you, Jonathan. I very much welcome this multimodal thinking, both in terms of a reconsideration of the relationship of our senses and of the different media recordings that are possible and, more importantly, a change of the relationship between researcher and research and this idea of responsibility, collaboration, and collective goals in what we try to accomplish in doing any kind of media work at all. And, more broadly, to consider ethically what the anthropological enterprise is about, and in doing that, allowing for a kind of re-listening or reconsideration of what the role of, say, audio or video is. What is the relationship between the two in that new context, where it's not just the anthropologist writing about the subjects or something like that,

where, ideally, it is more about collaboration and about doing things for reasons that are not just the anthropologists' reasons. That ethical move is really important. We use the phrase multimodal anthropology almost tongue in cheek in the beginning title card of the film. I mean, it was to draw some continuity between the old way of doing, what came to be called Visual Anthropology, and current work, now that the Visual Anthropology section was renamed Multimodal Anthropology in the journal of the American Anthropological Association [*American Anthropologist*]. So we use that term in order to draw the connection, in an uncomfortable way, between what they were doing and what our goal is for multimodal anthropology.

Listening Through Distorted Sound

JL: Let's discuss the distorted sound in the recordings I shared with you. I must acknowledge that I lied to myself: it's not rubbish even for me [laughing]. But at the same time, it was a kind of rubbish to the person who asked me to record these moments during my fieldwork in Romania. It was my first recording of these kinds of situations, and I was still an amateur, a kind of a Michael Rockefeller figure in this Roma neighborhood, and together with a musician friend, we made a mistake for the first recording: we used a shotgun microphone, the Sennheiser ME66/K6. For the recording you hear, we put the microphone at the other part of the room, 30 meters from the speakers. To describe the scene, it would be rubbish if you are just interested in the semiotics of what is said or sung in the microphone. The announcement and the sound that you hear at some point is just a conventional announcement of the entry of the godparents of the child or of the groom and the bride for a wedding. For the musicians it is really boring, and from a musical point of view, nothing of interest. But what is really striking is the dynamic of the volume and the distortion. You can hear the differences between the singer and a person from the family speaking into the microphone. The people are closer to the microphones than to the speakers.

EK: And there is all this delay effect. And here, in a minute, it turns off at a certain point.

JL: Yes, because it was the father of the child making the announcement. But I do not know if they deliberately fade it out or if he doesn't have the privilege to have such a delay effect. I am not sure because there really is a difference of engagement with the microphone between how a member of the audience speaks and how the musicians actually engage with the microphone: the mouth is really stuck close to it. You can hear a real difference. It is not at all the same atmosphere, as if it was not the same room.

EK: That's fascinating. There's so much information in how they use the audio, like when turning off the delay. Is it that the delay is meant to be there for the singer, but once somebody is speaking, it shouldn't be on anymore as it serves a different purpose? I wonder if it overloaded the microphone. Was it extremely loud in the room?

JL: Yes, it was really loud.

EK: So, it was too much for the microphone. Because it's not digital clipping. It's overloading at the mic, so it actually sounds okay. I mean, obviously, it's distorted. But it sounds like the actual sound system was also distorted. Right?

JL: Yes.

EK: So it's not just an artifact of recording. It's as if the distortion is part of the aesthetic of the audio. And that's an interesting aspect of rubbish. Just maybe as a side note: when I did my dissertation research back in 2000-2001 [laughing], I was interested in the aesthetics of amplification in temple festivals in Kerala, in South India (Karel 2003). And I thought a lot about loudness and distortion. And, yeah, it's part of this aesthetic of making an event big and loud, letting it overload on the system. And so it's not just about our recordings of it.

HW: Just like it is in Java. That's fascinating. I have to dig up your PhD. That's just what I'm writing about for my article for this issue, about this Javanese idea of loudness and authority being intertwined.

EK: Okay. Yeah [laughing].

HW: It completely destroyed my recordings.

EK: I have a chapter about that.

HW: Yeah, wonderful! Sorry, I was talking on top of you, because I was so excited about what you said.

EK: I never published anything, so I haven't contributed to the discourse in sound studies on this topic. So one of the things I would try to do is to ask people about the distortion, like neighbors on the street from the temple, blaring, music across the street. And over the course of the rainy season, the cassettes that they're using get increasingly distorted, I don't know if there's mold growing on them [Heikki laughing], and the audio will become crunchier and crunchier: crrrr, crrrr, crrrr, until it's almost just this rhythmic thing after [several] weeks, and you're just hearing the basic rhythm of a song coming through. I loved the sound of it. I have a lot of recordings of that, actually they are 20 years old now or more. But anyway, I would try to ask people about the distortion, what they think about it. I was a naive anthropologist trying to ask direct questions like this. And, of course, it didn't work at all. People didn't really know what I was asking. They would just say: "Well, I love that song," or "the song is good, because it's about God," and, "I love the lyrics, the lyrics are good," and "hearing the song, I hear the lyrics." I was not able to talk about what I heard as the quality of the audio. They were hearing the song; they weren't hearing the audio of the song. I think I would try to actually play back a recording I had made of how it sounded during the broadcast, so that they could listen to it a little bit out of context, and still it didn't work. They would hear right through the audio to hear the song itself. They would talk about whether they like that genre of song or whether this kind of "Tamil" song is appropriate to be played in this particular temple and stuff like that. But nothing about the distortion. So, for that daily broadcast from the temple, loudness was there. It was important that it was loud, but even more for the temple festivals, where you're really establishing bigness or greatness.

How to Hear the Context in the Ground Noise

JL: In my own ethnographic archive, silence is sometimes rubbish for me, because I do not recall where it was recorded. For this first fieldwork in Romania, I went with a musician friend, but we were not at all systematic and did not really take care of the metadata or the description of the sound. And what struck me when I listened to this audio recording is that I can hear the space and recall precisely where it was recorded when I can hear some sounds, but when there is only silence … I cannot recall which space it was, which house it was, for what occasions. So I was really thinking, do we absolutely need metadata to listen to a sound recording, in order for it not to be rubbish? Because you cannot rely on what are usually the indexes of space and location.

EK: Was it recorded for room tone for a film? Or what was the purpose of the recording in the first place?

JL: My friend had two approaches. He was recording while I was filming, and he also recorded a lot of more specific sound objects. He recorded drops, dozens of dogs, at different hours of the day, animals during the night or the day, from the street, or from the garden. We didn't really talk about what the strategy was. Because he was also a sound engineer, running his sound studio at the time, he had this approach of building a library of sounds around the project. It's also this topic that I wanted to talk about with the two of you. The idea of sound libraries, for me, is not akin to ethnographical location recordings. To my anthropological ear, field recordings are really linked to the need to have an atmosphere of a place. And that's also why some of these recordings are really difficult for me to deal with today. I am not sure these audio clips can be taken to be an archive of the soundscape, I rely on it more like a great sound library. So maybe, we can talk about both these specific recordings and also about the phenomenon of silence, metadata, and sound libraries.

EK: I totally identify with what you're saying about this desire for context in a recording, and the opposing desire to take something away from its context – again to refer to Pierre Schaeffer ([1966] 2002; see also Steintrager and Chow 2019) and the sound object. The whole approach of *musique concrète* was this idea of isolating the sound from its context, having it as an individual unit that you can use for musical composition. And the extension [of that with]? contemporary sound design is – it's not a musical composition – but these films are like compositions where you take these little objects and you slip them around. Now with Dolby Atmos, they use this term “objects,” again, for panning sounds in a three-dimensional space so that you can play it back on systems of different numbers of speakers and it will automatically position the sound at the right place. But anyway, I was always skeptical of that approach. Like you, I'm particularly interested in the context of these sounds, not in the sound as some kind of object. That's another way that filmmakers, or sometimes even ethnographic filmmakers, think differently on this: they will be happy to reach into a sound library to have the right sound, where they would never go to an Image Repository and use and image, or even a visual archive or something like that. “No, of course not, that wouldn’t be anthropological” or “no, that's not what happened in my fieldwork.” But with sound it doesn't matter – that sort of funny contrast. There have been times when I've regretted not making more of a sound library [laughing]: "Oh, it'd be really handy to have something to use for this project right now.” But, I mean, this idea of the sound object is a faulty idea. Sound is fundamentally not object-like. A lot of the recent critique of the notion of “soundscape” is built on this idea that there is something out there that you can record and study; this approach objectifies it. It turns it into a thing, whereas our experience of sound is really about relation and about connections, and it's always changing. Even this recording of silence, I boosted it by 30dB and uploaded it. It's something similar to what we did in the *Expedition Content*, some of the very quiet recordings. Just turn it way up. And then you can hear a lot in there. I think I can hear chickens. I can hear voices …

HW: And there is maybe somebody sewing something, or operating some kind of tool. I think I can hear some pigs, or animals munching food. There are so many things emerging from the silence.

EK: It is a fun exercise because it wouldn't be useful at that level, because of the hiss and so on. But a so-called "silent track," like this one, becomes interesting for me in a similar way that a lot of the archival stuff from *Expedition Content* became interesting. For some of that stuff, we also boosted it by almost the same amount, between 20dB and 30dB, hugely. And then you're really listening to the texture of the hiss as well as everything that's going on within it. That itself becomes an interesting part of the listening experience: you can hear the texture of that field of noise when you extremely amplify a 16-bit digital transfer.

JL: That's very interesting, because suddenly, what would be the rubbish, the compression artifacts (in my own recordings), become the index and what you use to make sense and to contextualize a sound recording. All the Dolby Surround formats from the mid-1970s onwards were intended to suppress the sound of technology (Birtwistle 2010). So by reducing all the ground noise it would make you able to make sense of the other sounds. But here you just perform a contrary exercise by boosting it, even the hiss intertwined with the rubbish, and then you actually have a context. That's really surprising, and great!

HW: I can't decide if it's rubbish any more or if it has become a sort of ultra-commoditized sound; it might be both, maybe. I mean that when a technological enhancement alters the quality of a recording, and possibly unearths some details, it also loses some of the properties that makes it unique.

JL: What I really appreciated while listening to our rubbish is the difference between our respective smartphone recordings we wrote about for this issue. I was surprised because the recordings I have been working on were shot in 2008, and yours, Heikki, were recorded only a little bit later, but it is almost like they were from two different generations, at least while listening to the audio compression system.

Presenting Experiences of Listening to Rubbish

HW: I wasn't planning on making a recording, but then I met these interesting people at this party, and I only had my smartphone so I just asked: "Can I record our conversation?" I put the smartphone on the ground, and I recorded for almost an hour. It was at a family gathering that a politician friend of mine invited me to. I was really excited by all the things that went on there. And then I went back to my lodgings and tried to listen to it: "Oh, this is useless, what a pity." I took really brief notes, and I thought that I would never return to this. But I decided to make a consistent effort for the sake of our special issue, and I think it paid off [laughs]. Although I'm not sure if the recording will be useful to any other person beside myself. It happened around seven years ago, and I felt that my memories from the event had empty gaps, so I combined my notes, memories, and this exercise in listening, and then I reconstructed this narrative [for the article]. I'm still not sure what to make of the rubbish aspects of the recording. I see how all the distortion that's going on there is in dialogue with the social context. You have these Islamic learned people who are true masters of oratory, and they start building up their oratories, and then, at the end of the speech the recording goes: Brrrrr, BRRR, BRRRRR. This was a Javanese Islamic gathering, but the bureaucrat that showed up from the local government was a Christian, so he had to employ completely different rhetorical and oratorical tricks in order to gain standing within the event, and he speaks so softly that the recording is almost perfect during his speech [laughing]. So when you look at the amplitude of the recording, the distortion follows the dramatic arc of the whole event. I don't know if it's meaningful, but I keep coming back to the Brian Eno anecdote. I just needed to dive into the recording and really suffer through it, and then all kinds of interesting things started to come out of it, even though I had sort of given up on it before.

EK: Obviously, it wasn't in the sound, but the meanings that you've just been talking about, bringing out, are fascinating. The relationship between the oratorical style and the development and the presence of that distortion at the same time: so whenever he builds up intensity, it also becomes more and more distorted. There are lots of figurative meanings there. It sounds like it's been fruitful for all those reasons, and seeing that, you wouldn't have had to look at the waveform if it hadn't been for the fact that the recording was so distorted.

HW: Yes, it's not that I took a sound engineer's point of view, but, at least, I had to remove myself from the usual sort of anthropological perspective in order to get something out of it. And it was a really useful exercise, but if it was a reasonable exercise, is it still rubbish? We are back at the same dilemma.

JL: In one of his papers, Brian Larkin (2014) made a brilliant analysis about the mediality of loudspeakers in Nigeria. He perfectly described the sonic layers produced by loudspeakers and the competition that took place through amplified sound. It helped me, because in the neighborhood I worked in, there was a competition between young people who had impressive sound systems. As you cannot call the police, you need to develop what Larkin calls "techniques of inattention." But his paper also revealed the different dilemmas an ethnographer and a visual or multimodal anthropologist face when they decide to present experiences of listening to rubbish. For instance, I don't think Larkin made recordings of these very loud sounds in order to present them as a result of his inquiry. It was not an anthropology through sound recordings (Feld and Brenneis 2004); he did not deal directly with the audio. So for him, and for most ethnographers I guess, it is only a matter of describing rubbishness or loudness through words. But for a visual anthropologist or a multimodal anthropologist, the question is: "How do I publish that?" "How can I present it in order to make my readers, or audience, listen?" As an ethnographer, you can pull out things, based on your experience and embodied knowledge, but when you present it, people will relate to it without your experience, and it will be rubbish to them.

EK: That is right, that's going back to the earlier history of visual anthropology, like David McDougall who writes about the suspicion of the moving image, because there's too much information (MacDougall 1998). The ethnographer can't direct the attention of the audience or readers in the way that they want to – like Brian Larkin can, for example, with respect to these loudspeaker sounds. He is able to tell us exactly what he wants to say about them, all the aspects of it, but he doesn't make you enter into it. This "too much information" is exactly what becomes of interest for visual anthropologists or multimodal anthropologists. That's what we're interested in, at least speaking for myself, that inability to focus the listeners attention. Saying that this [overwhelming information] is distracting is missing the point. It's not possible to be distracted by something that's part of the world that we're entering into here. It's more like being interested in something [laughs]. But with Heikki's recording, there's an additional problem, which is that it is just literally painful to listen to it [laughing]. The nature of that distortion is … and I tried a couple of things on it, like noise reduction strategies: I tried de-clipping, and I tried a dialogue isolate plugin and different things. But that distortion is really throughout the entire spectrum of the audio, from low to high.

HW: Yes, but if there hadn't been distortion, I would probably have overly focused on the "near-field" discussion; but thanks to the distortion, I had to think of the three layers, and they're in a sort of dynamic balance, because the people giving the speeches have to fight for the attention of the audience. And if they don't, the level of background noise starts rising, and then they need to speak louder or employ some other tricks. And then there's the place where I was sitting, the VIP dais, which had its own side conversations, and they had their own dynamic balance – sometimes they had to pause conversing if a person with higher authority was speaking. But, for example, when the Christian bureaucrat was speaking, they were making jokes about the way he spoke. So, I was mainly figuring out this sort of dynamic relationship between these layers,

because there was very little discursive content I could make out of the recording because of the poor quality. My approach to listening was completely different. And that was an interesting exercise.

JL: Maybe we could conclude with a question that relates to the theme we raised in the beginning of our conversation about the differences between analog and digital artifacts. How do we rely on both of them? Is it really that the digital artifacts are more painful and less poetic by essence, or is it just a relation between the time of the recording and the moment of listening that somehow is indexed by the perceived rubbishness of the sound? I'm not sure how I relate to it. And with Heikki's phone recording, I think we are reaching a threshold.

HW: In other words, will my recording ever be considered nostalgic and poetic 40 years from now?

EK: Well, I don't know. It is hard on the ears for sure. I would also say that Heikki's dynasty excerpt is just so … you could say that, in objective terms, the digital audio is capable of much brighter and harsher sounds than analog tape is. It will reproduce that stuff way up to 20 kilohertz … It can really hurt your ears in a way that the analog stuff maybe can't. It's like there might be something going on above 12 kilohertz, but not too much: 15 or 16 kilohertz. Whereas there can be incredibly loud stuff happening digitally at 16 to 18 kilohertz, and it is going to hurt your ears. So it's not just an aesthetic interpretation. Meanwhile, that's not really possible with analog stuff. I mean, maybe it is subjective, because for me, very high frequency stuff is painful. Either I don't hear it, or it's painful. Whereas the clunks, speed changes, and clicks of the analog tape, the Nagra that Rockefeller is using, are never actually painful.

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