

EMS Conference, Berlin | June 2014

## questions of ephemera in real-world space

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evaluating acousmatic compositional strategies within public sound art

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Music, Technology & Innovation  
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A very common compositional strategy in acousmatic music involves the development of real-world scenarios that form part of the musical discourse—and the emergence into and departure from these—sometimes dramatic, sometimes by degree. A piece may be designed to explore a set of thematic ideas which prompt the use of these real-world references and sound sources, which end up being points of compositional departure, or nodes, around which a piece is constructed.

1. the nature of the perceived acoustic space;
2. the disposition of sound-objects within the space
3. the recognition of individual sound objects

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Trevor Wishart, 'Sound Symbols & Landscapes' (1986)

This is all well understood and practiced—Rajmil Fischman among others, discusses the approach when considering the role of mimesis in acousmatic music. Landscapes might be derived whole from raw recordings, but often they are built by layering materials via Wishartian strategies—providing a landscape 'stage'—and populating that stage with sonic protagonists whose behaviour over time, particularly their disposition upon this stage, will fill in the complete 'scene'.

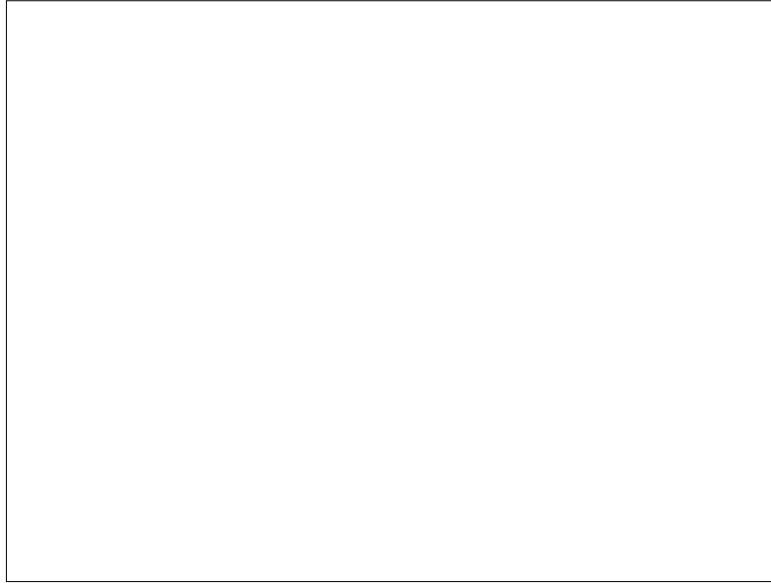
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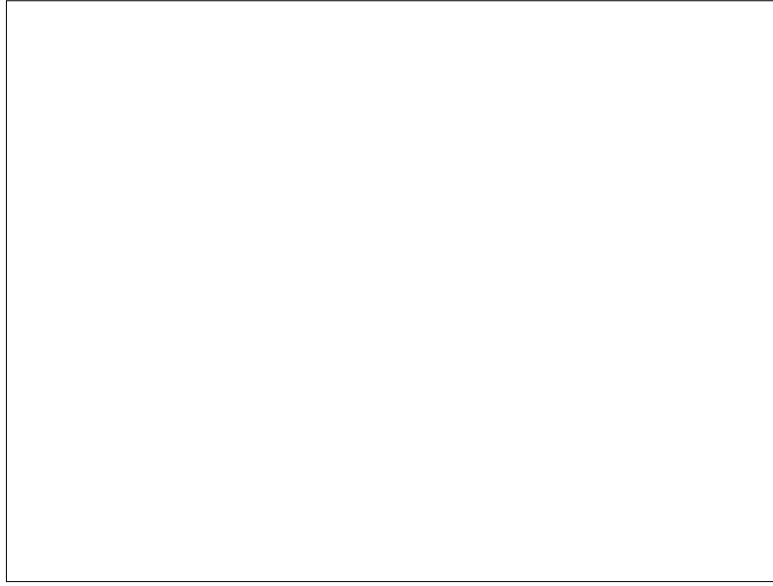
Wishart proposes that “by articulating the relationships between sound images we [can] develop not only sonic structures ... but a whole area of metaphorical discourse”. This is achieved by means of “a whole matrix of related and transforming images [within which a series of] metaphorical implications become increasingly ramified”. In other words, as composers we can connect these various sound images, allowing us to build and manipulate perceived relationships between them, constructing narratives.





The use of the word 'image' here implies something experienced as static. And in fact Denis Smalley writes that our acousmatic experience of a given landscape does indeed build spatially as we aurally explore its terrain to yield a complete 'image' which exists outside the bounds of time. Time effectively becomes space.

We are left with something akin to the memory of a photographic still (although the space of a photograph, conversely, requires time for our eyes to navigate in order to register its detail). It is the combination of these stills that together form the narrative experience of the work.

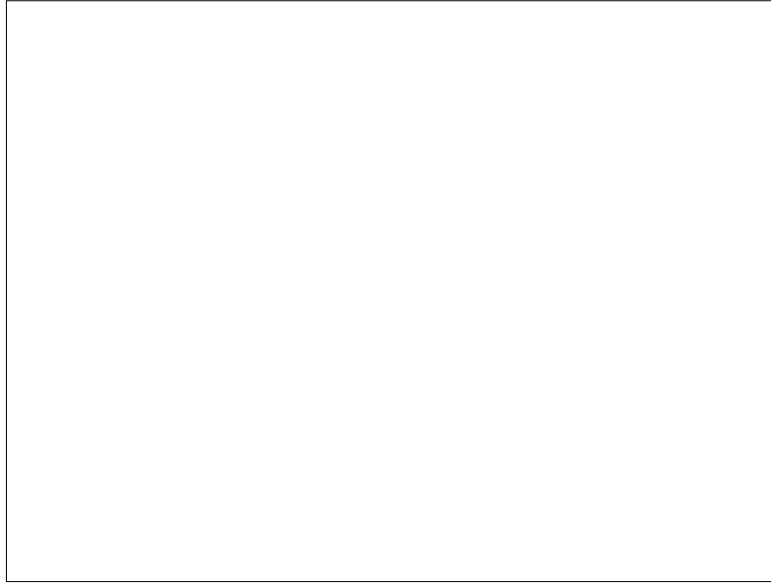


These narratives are, of course, not straightforward. If we stick with the photographic stills analogy, we could compare the stringing together of such stills as a linear montage.

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Gavin Parry & Jacqueline Butler, *Towards Ephemeral Narrative* (2011)

Gavin Parry and Jacqueline Butler propose that “telling a straightforward story with a sequence of stills is notoriously difficult...: static photographs show far more than they tell, so the photo essay relies as much on ellipsis and association as coherent argument or story.” Photographs are involved in the process of ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’, they suggest, and “The ‘ruptures’ between a series of photographic stills can open up a non-temporal space for thought and ideas, engaging the viewer with the possibility of ephemeral narratives, encouraging a more sensual and intuitive engagement with the photographs themselves.” This in turn encourages a “‘looking into’ rather than a reading outside of and around’, and a loosening of narrative hooks.

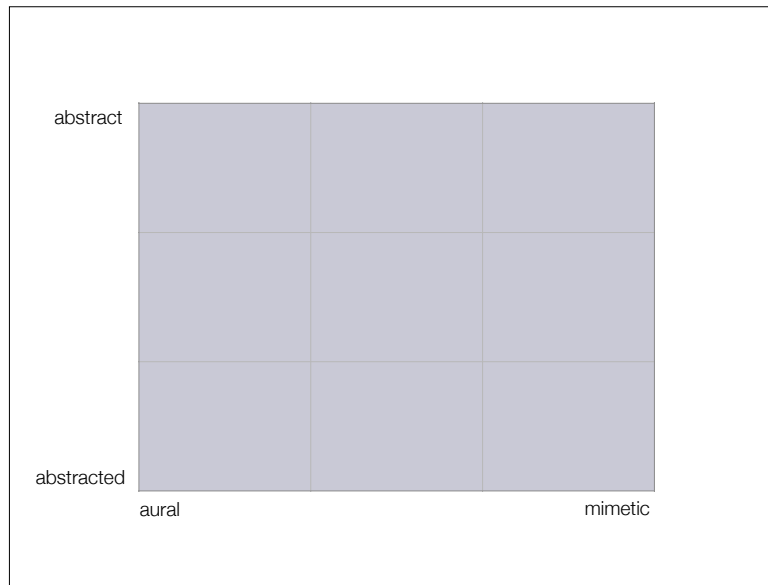


This all seems quite familiar. And in fact such ideas have been explored quite extensively, for example by Katherine Norman whose Poetry of Reality article presented an drew parallels with montage film and documentary art. Her descriptions of the experience of works clearly demonstrate the very personal esthetic construction of loose narratives over time independent of the intent of the composer.

Of course the experience of hearing these sonic images articulated over time is not the same as experiencing visual images presented spatially over a page. The latter can be navigated in a non-linear fashion. Nevertheless, the idea of these 'images' constituting a narrative that is entirely ephemeral, and visceral, remains relevant.

Francis Dhomont: *Espace/Escape, Novars*,  
Robert Normandeau: *Jeu*  
Andrew Lewis: *Ascent, môt(G)wyn*  
Jonty Harrison: *Hot Air, Internal Combustion, Rock 'n' Roll, Unsound Objects*  
David Berezan: *Cyclo, Frosty*  
Manuella Blackburn, *Switched On*  
Ben Ramsay, *Low pass*

A listener's interpretation of these ephemeral narratives can be finessed by the composer through various extra-musical means, most principally the title. I haven't found much discussion about the bestowing of titles in acousmatic music, but it strikes me as being something worthy of exploration. All titles attempt to 'set the scene', conveying the essence of the work through the most minimal of programmatic aids (or 'poietic leakage', to use Simon Emmerson's rather lovely designation). They may (and usually do) amount to only one or two words, which permit (through both brevity and strategic word choice—the pun is quite common in the titling of acousmatic works) a degree of ambiguity or 'looseness' of interpretation (on the part of both composer or listener) that accommodates (or encourages) the ephemerality of any narrative contained therein; indeed, they may do the latter even more effectively and tangibly than explicit programme notes.



Simon Emmerson's Language grid will be quite helpful at this point to illustrate this. Although the grid is designed to consider a piece in its entirety, I'm going to use it in the service of a quick analysis of Francis Dhomont's *Espace/Escape* to identify and categorise 'images' that it provoked for me, informed by the title, on a recent listening.

(I've chosen this one as it will be familiar to pretty much everyone and I can forego a musical example)

Space in Francis Dhomont's <i>Espace/Escape</i> (1989)	
aural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• two stable pitched iterated bleeps left &amp; right of space [<i>lateral/physical space</i>]</li> <li>• rising/falling pitched glissandi (various timbres/textures) [<i>vertical space</i>]</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• high-energy sound reminiscent of rushing-train-and-horn [<i>implying rapid movement</i>]</li> <li>• rolling wooden textures [<i>movement through space</i>]</li> <li>• rolling/bouncing objects disappearing to left or right with increasing reverb [<i>movement through space (lateral/distance)</i>]</li> <li>• scrunching wooden textures [<i>sense of acoustic space</i>]</li> <li>• scrunching wooden textures with glissando, increasing amplitude [<i>movement through space; arrival</i>]</li> </ul>
mimetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• footsteps moving left-to-right [<i>movement through space</i>]</li> <li>• sirens rushing past, with doppler [(<i>rapid</i>) <i>movement through space</i>]</li> <li>• approaching train horn, with doppler [(<i>rapid</i>) <i>movement through space</i>]</li> <li>• large acoustic of train concourse [<i>large/reverberant acoustic; public space</i>]</li> <li>• crowds of voices [<i>public space</i>]</li> <li>• wooden creaking [<i>intimate space</i>]</li> </ul>

We can get rid of the abstracted/abstract axis immediately because this is piece that's been conceived and constructed organically. What we're left with is a series of encapsulations of significant events, moments, phrasic trajectories, constructed and recorded landscapes, all of which could be viewed as 'stills' with which the intended narrative of the piece —ephemeral as it is—play out.

Notably, both space and escape are conveyed in all areas of syntax, from **aural** (the more musical of the materials), through the **aural-mimetic** (sounds exhibiting behaviours resembling those of real-life phenomena) to the **mimetic** (recorded real-life phenomena).

Escape in Francis Dhomont's *Espace/Escape* (1989)

aural

- rising and falling glissandi with attenuation denoting spent energy [*released energy*]
- bleeps [*latent/potential energy (imminent escape)*]
- throbbing/cyclic pitches [*latent/potential energy*]
- throbbing/cyclic pitches moving apart spatially [*divergence*]

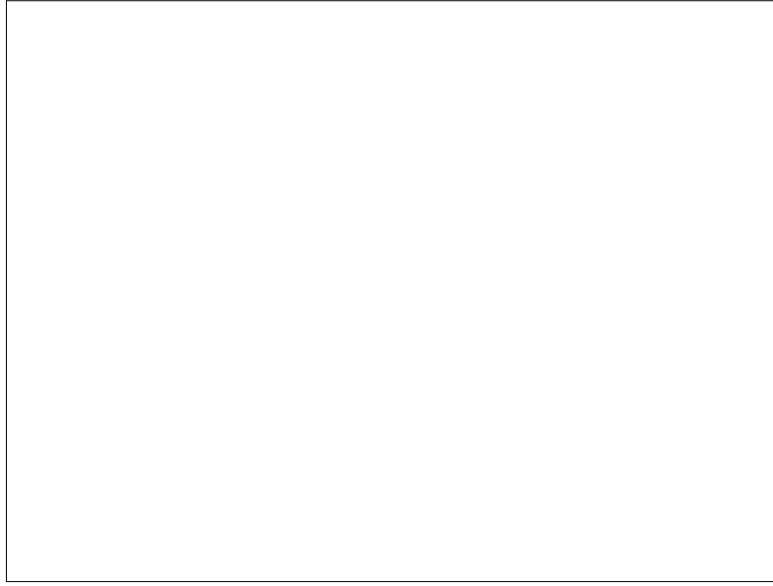
- cyclic 'roulette wheel'-like characteristics [*latent/potential energy*]
- rolling/bouncing to left or right with increasing reverb [*departure*]
- transition of loud drones to airy wispiness and fade [*released energy*]

mimetic

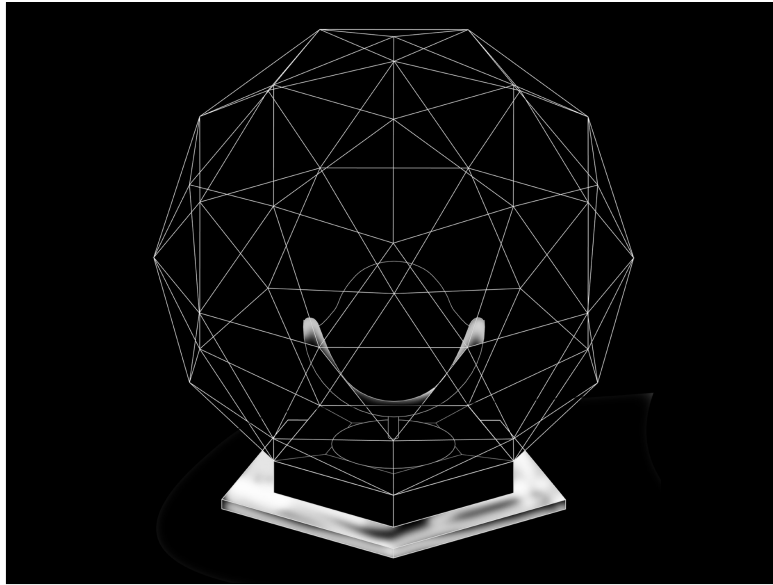
- sirens rush past [*departure (but 'foiled' escape: sirens are musically 'frozen')*]
- flapping pigeon wings [*flurried escape attempt*]
- footsteps moving across the space; increasing distance [*departure*]
- creaking door slam [*departure*]
- hum of electric train awaiting departure [*latent/potential energy*]
- intimate creaks suggestive of rocking chair [*escapism (évasion de la réalité?)*]
- child's chuckle [*escapism*]

Of course these materials appear in a fixed progression determined by the composer, but in my recollection, the piece remains a collection of these 'stills'—quite vividly remembered, but not necessarily linearly configured.





These issues have become of particular interest to me in terms of how they relate to my ongoing interest in environmental sonic art. Apologies to those who've heard some of this before, but I continue to wonder about how these compositional strategies involving material derived from life might be experienced when reinserted back into life contexts, and in turn, what impact this might have on compositional intent and process.

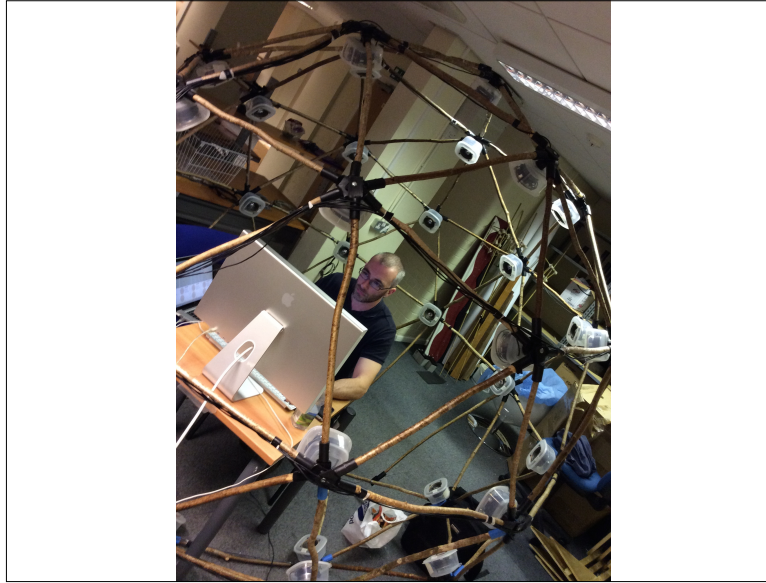


From 2012 onwards I've been working on the DOME project. This comprises one or more geodesic dome or sphere structures with speakers placed in the vertices between the triangular panels of each. Listeners sit within the dome (or sphere), experiencing sound circumferentially and distally---always outwards/surrounding.

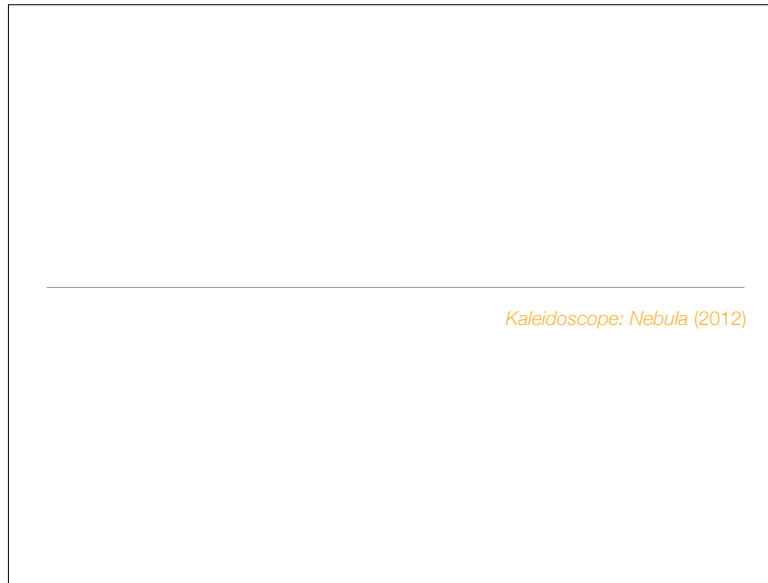


A couple of pictures of the skeleton. It's just a speaker system, so could accommodate the presentation of anything electroacoustic. It is of course certainly not the only multi-speaker domed configuration out there (Zirkonium has already been mentioned this morning). Unlike these, though, it is small, which makes it intimate, cheap and portable (so it can be put anywhere, including outside).

In all cases, the dome is unenclosed, and therefore acoustically transparent, enabling a listener inside to experience the soundscape beyond the playing loudspeakers as an extension of that presented by the dome itself (a kind of space-within-space). And this is important, because it means sounds from loudspeakers may be indistinguishable from those coming from beyond since the sound material may be derived from those sounds. So the dome is designed to encourage a much wider awareness of space (and place)—a listening-beyond of the constructed land- or sound-scape into the already-there. It becomes, perhaps, a listening aid, inviting/encouraging a re-experiencing (or simply raising an awareness) of the existing sonic environment.



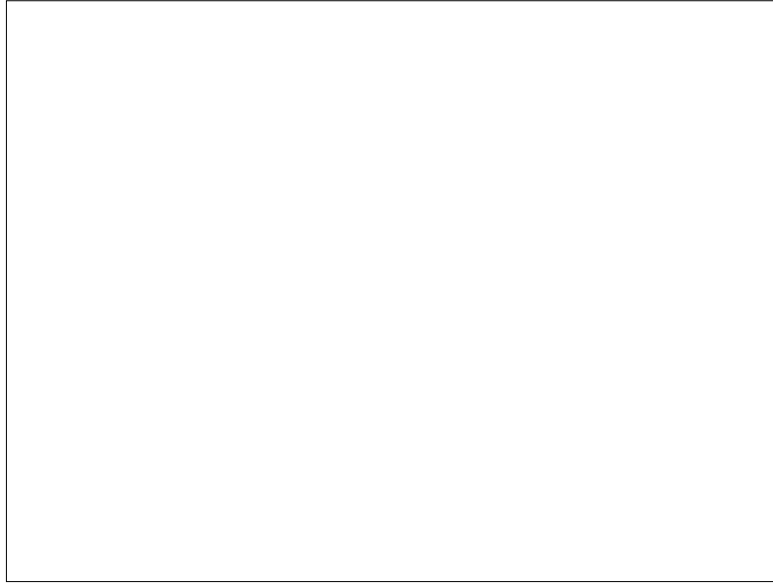
None of those pictures show the dome where I'd like it to be—i.e. outside. But the idea here is that the ephemeral landscape narratives—explored by means of acousmatic compositional strategies—when presented within installation or sound art environments (i.e. inserted much more closely into 'real life') might be a way of leading the ear into closer listening to the environment—to encourage reflection on—via a re-experiencing of—everyday environmental sound phenomena. As such, I see such a strategy as uniting acousmatic and soundscape compositional concerns with those of acoustic ecology, and perhaps providing a means of reconnecting the acousmatic art with a 'life' context.



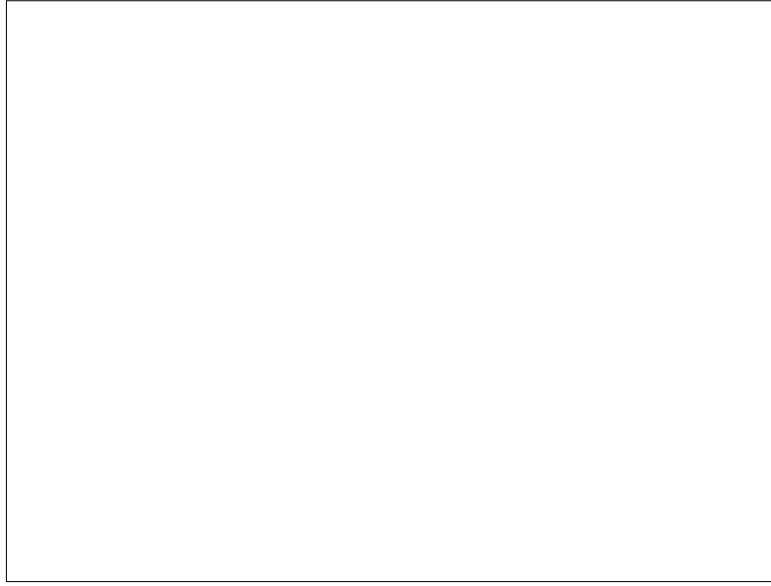
A quick example (if there's time):

Presented in an outdoor space, for example, we might imagine that the swirling bell resonances that open this example are sufficiently loud to obscure the existing landscape, and thus provide a sense of sonic enclosure to the dome.

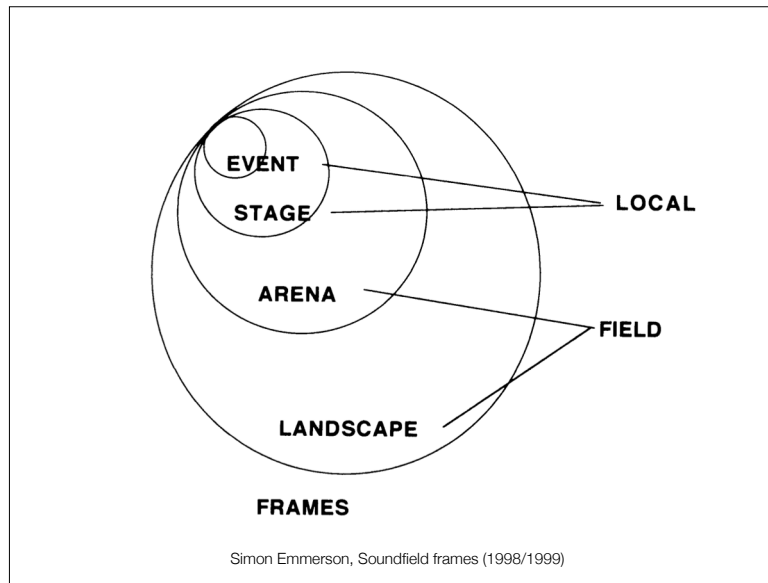
But this is followed by the musical collapse of that material into an environment in which only the stream and change-ringing sounds are audible, and in which the other ambient sounds of the environment (likely birdsong and perhaps distant traffic) might impinge on the constructed landscape but of course remain appropriate to it (or believable within it).



So compositionally, the narrative becomes one of flow between states of the perceived nature of the dome—its physical characteristics and its material structure—and its context.



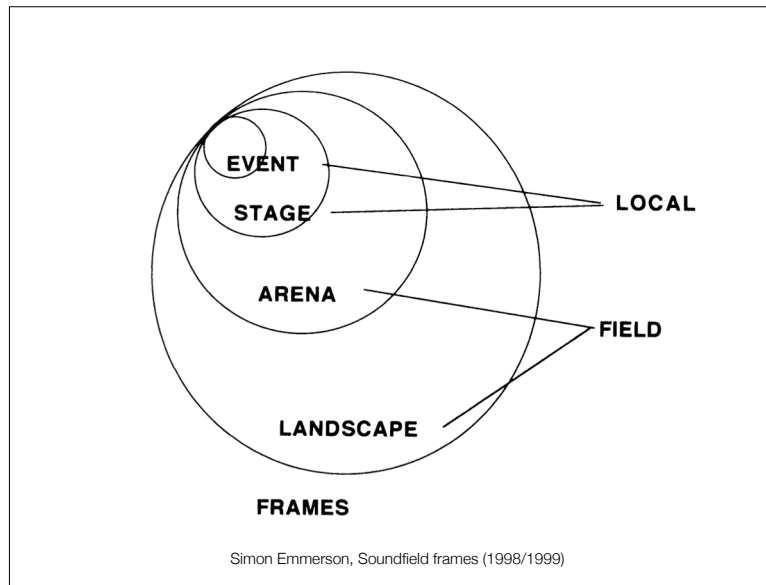
An approach like this raises a variety of questions in terms of how the experience of listening to acousmatic compositional strategies might be affected by their reassociation with real life. Which in turn invites the evaluation and possibly adaptation of existing taxonomies and analytical frameworks for electroacoustic music, which typically concern themselves with such music principally as it is experienced in concert conditions, or at least abstracted from any real-life context.



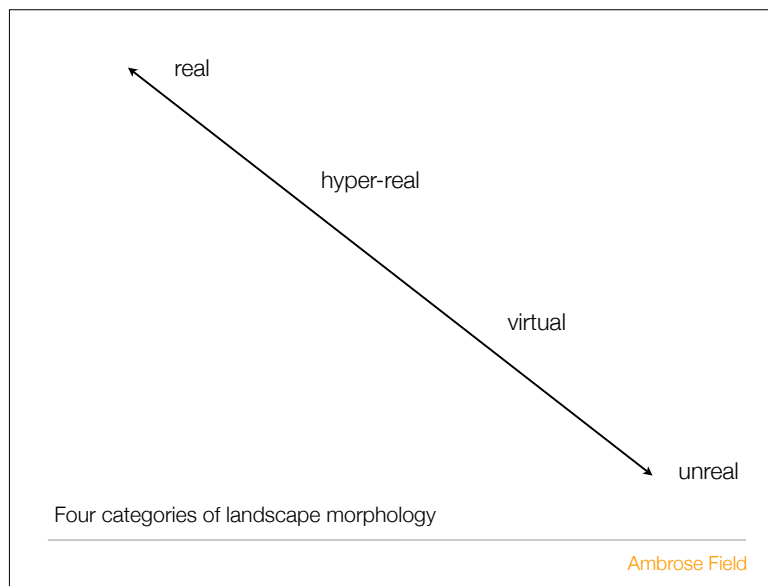
A worthy point of departure here, then, would be to consider the context offered within the concert hall.

Simon Emmerson identifies a series of 'soundfield frames', denoting defined areas of interest which might be captured through recording, or produced or emulated through electroacoustic means. These range from the event and stage (local frames) to the arena and landscape (field frames). Arena space is described as 'the whole public space inhabited by performers and listeners' (Denis Smalley), while the landscape encompasses the wider environment 'bounded by the acoustic horizon'. If talking about acousmatic music heard within the concert hall, we are talking about the landscape as captured and recorded; This is not the same as the landscape actual. In the concert hall, the former may be superimposed on the (real) arena space of the latter.





Denis Smalley discusses the conundrum of superimposed spaces in Space-form and the acousmatic image. He also identifies the interplay between acousmatic sound and instruments in mixed-media performance as 'duality of play' between arena spaces—the concert space itself, the space enacted by the performers, and the 'spatial context of the acousmatic sounds'. Tantalisingly, he proposes that 'with acousmatic music in public contexts, the spatial image can liberate itself from the physical presence of the listening space—it can escape its arena'. But he stops at that. In any event, such 'duality of play' as he identifies in relation to arena space might exist between landscape frames in presenting sounds in real-life contexts. It might be prudent to take this into account when composing, producing artificial local (stage and event) frames which can fit into real field (arena and landscape) frames.



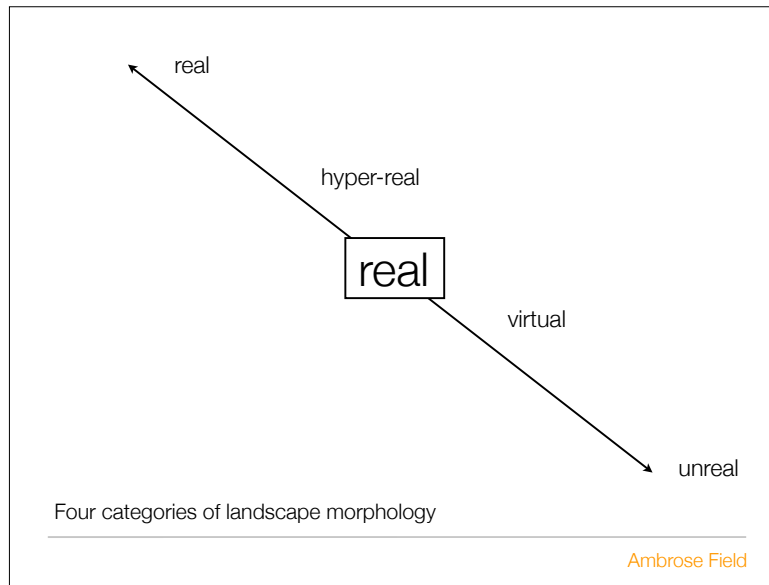
Ambrose Field: four categories of landscape morphology when discussing acousmatic compositional practice

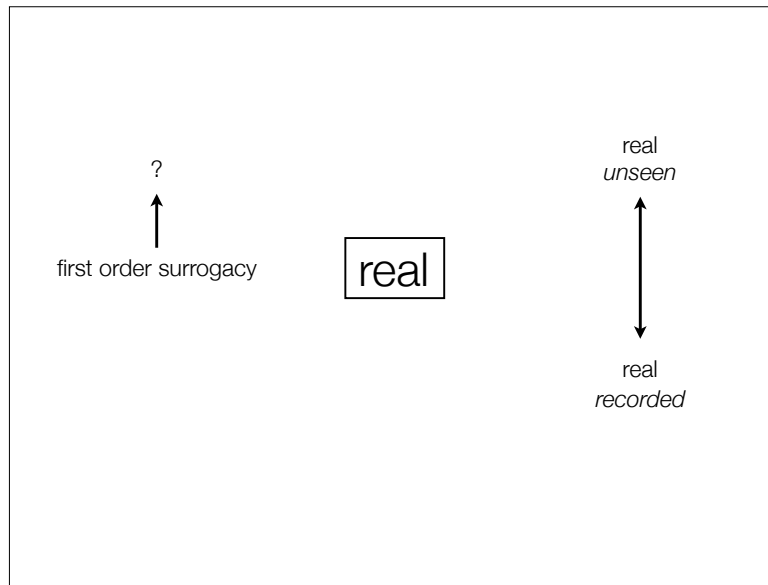
➡ We can map these to a notional continuum of real- to unreal-dominated discourse in acousmatic art

Field defines...

- ➡ **real** as the unadulterated trace of an event or sonic landscape (e.g. Chris Watson)
- ➡ **hyper-real** as those which involve some manipulation of the 'real', though the essential realism remains intact, to the extent that it's impossible to tell the difference (e.g. Luc Ferrari)
- ➡ **virtual** worlds as those with looser (or more obviously imposed) narratives and surrealistic play (e.g. Dhomont's Espace Escape)
- ➡ **unreal**: departs entirely from the real, encouraging intrinsic listening, and ostensibly making no reference to real-world sounds or landscapes at all.

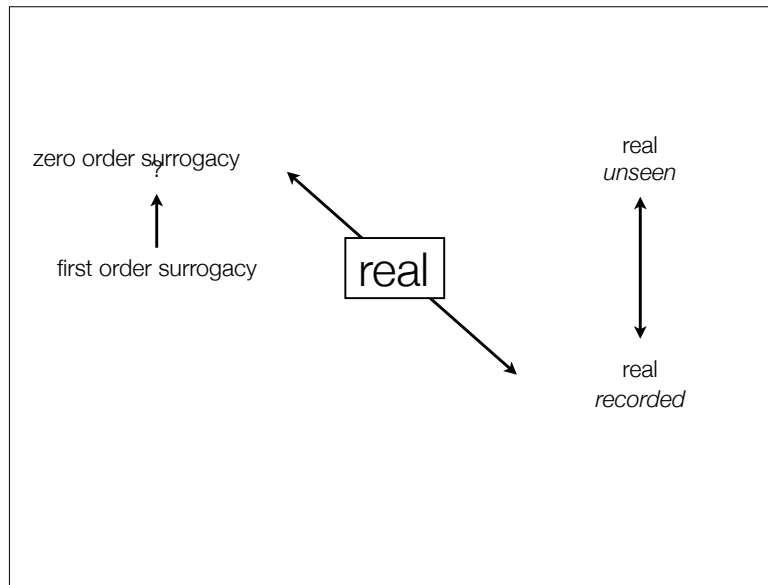
These categories presuppose that we're listening to sound that is pre-recorded (or electronically mediated) but it may not be: acousmatic simply means that the source is not visible. This could be any sound that is hidden from view—recorded, electronically mediated, or otherwise.





What *isn't* there is a distinction between real unseen and the real recorded (or electronically mediated). [actually Field sees as synonymous]





Similarly, if we look at Denis Smalley's **gestural surrogacy**:

➡ first order surrogacy refers to a recorded real-world sound that's had no manipulation applied so that there's still a direct relationship between the sound and it's agent. It doesn't distinguish between this and a sound that's *unseen but truly happening*.

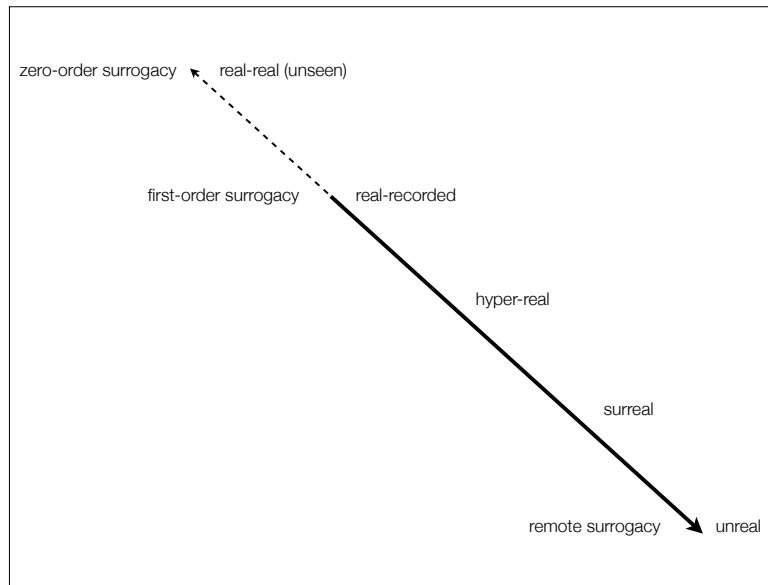
➡ it may be impossible to tell the difference; but looking behind the curtain may reveal that the sound is not surrogate at all

The difference is subtle, but profound.

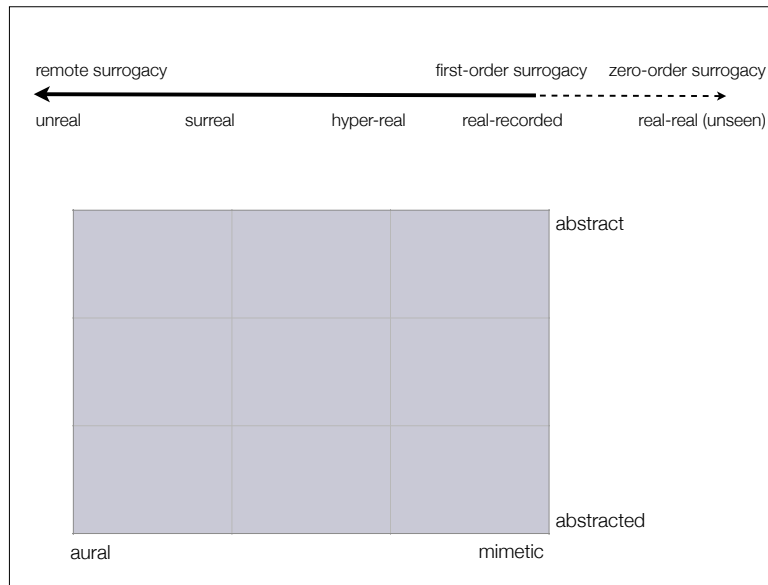
So bearing this ambiguity in mind, we might need to split up these notions of 'real', thus:

➡ Field's continuum encompasses the real within its original environment (not abstracted from it)

➡ Smalley's to encompass a zero-order level of surrogacy

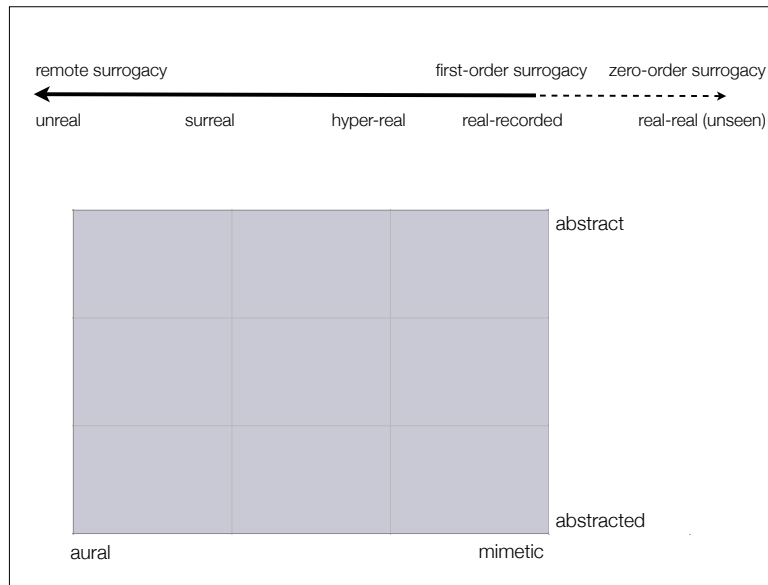


In either case, we don't need necessarily to identify a series of sounds as belonging to one or other category: the interest lies in the ambiguity between these two. The two categories of 'real' warrant extension in order for analysis of such musical/sonic play to be meaningful.



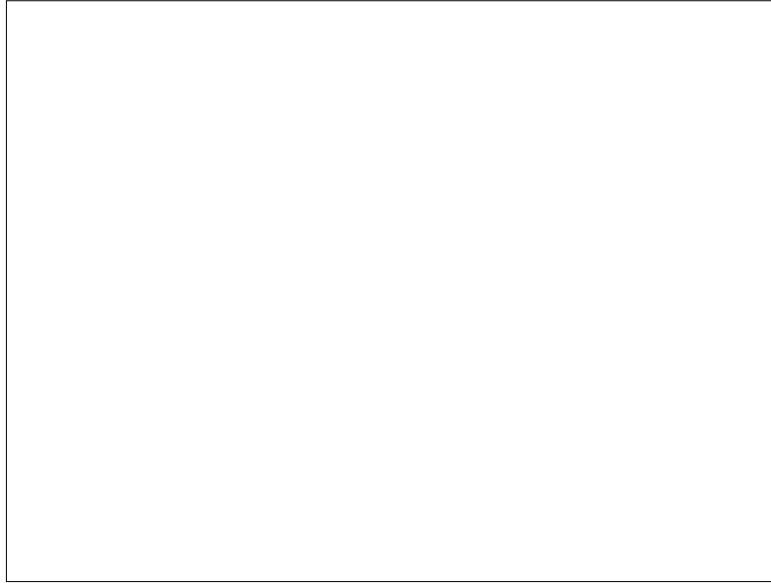
We could look again at Simon Emmerson’s language grid. Simon himself identifies a potential challenge to the grid in relation to instruments which are, of course, real-life phenomena—these are not acousmatic recordings of instrumentalists. His counterclaim is that

‘we may concede that instrumental sound-images and evocation, being primarily musical, may still be allowed within [the category of aural discourse dominant]. It is the sounds of the environment not traditionally associated with music whose imagery we wish to discuss as mimetic discourse (Emmerson 1986: 26). But these sounds, if they’re really real, aren’t mimetic, and so presumably occupy a space somewhere beyond the space accommodated by the grid.



It still makes sense to talk about such sounds and discourse within the context of the grid. The drones of Max Neuhaus's Times Square installation, for example, might be categorised according to its spectromorphological—aural—characteristics if listened to in isolation—and certainly that appears to have been how it was conceived, being composed of synthetically-produced timbres. However, it takes on real-world characteristics in the context of the New York subway, whose transport system it resembles. So in essence, it isn't even perceived as mimetic: it is perceived as real.





This last example demonstrates that issues of considering real life contexts in relation to electroacoustic sounds are not just limited to my own, arguably rather narrow compositional interests as identified at the outset of this talk. All sound art and installations presented in public spaces are experienced in the context of a real life sound landscape, whether they are explicitly designed to interact with that landscape or not. If they involve any acousmatic content (acousmatic in the broadest sense—i.e. unseen sound from loudspeakers) they may prove to accommodate expanded analytical methodologies such as those I'm proposing. I certainly think there is more useful work to be done in expanding existing analytical frameworks to encompass a consideration of the real-world in the presentation of real-world music.