

Spectral Geologies: Listening to traces in contested territories

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Abstract

Monuments exist as loci of received official history. Just like the intended unassailability of official history, they are designed to be resilient and permanent. However, the world around them is in constant flux, calling into question their significance and situating them firmly within the tensions of the quotidien. Drawing on fieldwork (field recording and photography) undertaken at various spomenik sites in the former Yugoslav republics of the Balkans, this paper outlines a creative response to the investigation of sound's potential as an agent of emergent contributions to historical narrative, counter to totalising tendencies in history telling and nation building. In suggesting that sound be considered a geological, sedimentary medium with the potential to transmit and sequester memory, it considers the possibility of hearing, however faint, the murmured traces of the past through its excavation. By examining recordings taken from sites of shifting significance and in seeking to uncover those sounds that were once present, the research questions whether there is any significant difference, pragmatically-speaking, between the sounds we hear and the sounds we think, in turn entertaining a mode of listening which enables the audient to hear the past in new *inaudible* ways.

Keywords: sonic traces, sonic geology, memory, history, spomeniks, monuments, field recording, yugoslavia

[Memory] is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. They who seek to approach their own past must conduct themselves like a person digging...They must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images severed from all earlier associations, that stand - like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery - in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding.

-Walter Benjamin, *A Berlin Chronicle* (3-60)

Introduction

What if all sounds ever produced still exist and have to come to rest in the sediment of the earth, in the materials we live amongst, in bodies? In *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* Manuel DeLanda (2000) analyses urban development through the various processes and flows of what he terms *mineralisation* (17-18). For DeLanda, history can be read as a series of agglomerations, calcifications, erosions, and fissures of the mineral exoskeleton formed by the ordering forces of grouped humans. Extending the analogy, stratification is considered an important phenomenon evident within these flows, a phenomenon that we can study for the traces of the past and that continues as an ever-influencing plural entity (DeLanda).

The project outlined in this paper is an attempt to foster a form of speculative listening which considers sound from the perspective of geological formation. What happens when we begin to consider the sounds emanating from past actions as phenomena that go on to find themselves, post-audibility, strewn among us and accumulating like the material debris that makes up geological strata? What means do we have to excavate these traces and what bearing could they possibly have on both future readings of the past and past pronouncements on the future?

The research investigates whether memory adheres to sound and if so, to what extent sound may be considered a conduit for accessing a sedimentary and spatialised memory, and what the ramifications of this are? In considering sound as an archaeological phenomenon imbued and persisting in these sites, and in seeking to extend our powers of audition, this project asks what we hear when we listen to these sites and further, goes so far as to ask what we hear when we imagine what we could hear?

For DeLanda, encountering historical narratives through the lens of geological flows can form a potent antidote to top-down notions of history-telling and the totalising, nation-building projects they come to serve. What place then can sound play in this countering, in this righting of the dominance of state thinking when it comes to the stories to which we grant voice?

The spomenik as locus



Figure 1: The artist's recording of the Battle of Sutjeska Memorial Monument (*Spomen-spomenik Bitka na Sutjesci*) at Tjentište, Bosnia & Herzegovina, September 2019.

Progressing from theoretical conjecture, this project aims to trial this new approach *in situ*. The chosen field of application consists of a series of monument (spomenik) sites in the former Yugoslav republics of the Western Balkans.

These sites were chosen for the richness, density and complexity of human flows that have attended and surrounded them since their establishment post-WWII, and that have shifted continuously in the intervening years. The contestations that have marked the area, and that the spomeniks respond to, are still very much alive today and contribute to the apposite nature of the region to this project. It is important to note that while the project in no way approaches the spomenik sites as if part of a constellation of homologous entities, it employs serialised practices as an integral part of its methodology. The technical approach to each site is consistent and repeatable with the intended result being that it is the sites that speak rather than their objectification. The technology thus, to use an audio metaphor, to some extent phase cancels itself out.

While the consideration of official monuments is proving increasingly topical in many parts of the world today, the situation of twentieth century monuments in the Balkans is considerably different to that of those from the eighteenth and nineteenth century in former colonial nations. While such a method could have applications here, this field of discussion is not the immediate remit of this project. The reasons for the distinction do though require passing mention.

Whilst there are many surface-level similarities between colonial monuments and Yugoslav spomeniks, these often bely a lack of understanding of the latter (and indicate its resultant current fetishisation). Firstly, while there have certainly been many contestations of sovereignty and the region has been profoundly marked by the play of global superpowers (Habsburg, Ottoman and Soviet, EU et al), the former Yugoslav republics, at least within the time period concerned, are not regions generally considered to have been either colonial forces or colonised entities.

Secondly, because most of the spomeniks memorialise events from the Second World War (albeit from the Partisan victors' perspective) they are considered markers of resistance rather than conquest.

Thirdly, at the time of the establishment of these sites, and despite marking past events, in their design they looked forward. They initially existed as part of a utopian movement within architecture and design that sought to exalt the potential of humankind rather than the status of a conqueror or victor.

Finally, the spomeniks are not statues per se. They are far less figurative than the monuments depicting the realist forms that former colonial powers and their colonies are today contending with, and were in many cases hyper-abstracted or symbolic. They do not represent single, named actors from positions of power.

All of this is not to say that the spomeniks of the Western Balkans have not been contentious. That they have been is a profound manifestation of what DeLanda would call the turbulences within a system (36). As such it marks the region as decidedly fit for purpose.

Whilst a widespread chorus of voices questioning colonial statues is a relatively new development, debates regarding the fate of Yugoslav-era spomeniks have raged in the former republics at least since the beginning of Yugoslavia's dissolution in the 1980's. It's necessary to take a brief look at the geopolitical history of the region to explain why and to contextualise a present day listening to these sites. Granted such a summary may appear to be an example of the type of history-telling

that this project seeks to resist. However, it's in the broad strokes of this type of telling that we can mark out a place for the finer details that may have been subsumed in its course and to "brush history against the grain" (Benjamin 2019, 200). We would do well to bear this in mind as we proceed.

Contextual flux

Yugoslavia (literally *Land of the South Slavs*) was established in the wake of World War II, largely by a conglomerate of anti-fascist entities who had provided resistance to Axis incursions into the Western Balkans from Germany, Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria, amongst others. In many ways it was the continuation of the pan-South Slavic project that had resulted in the short-lived Kingdom of Yugoslavia during the inter-war years.

Until its dissolution in 1991-1992 Yugoslavia consisted of a federation of six republics (Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) together with two autonomous regions (Kosovo and Vojvodina). From its formation until his death in 1980, the nation was presided over by the former Partisan general Josip Broz 'Tito', who forged a strongman approach to rule.

Tito was however, also a deft mediator and keen student of history. He was well aware of the historical weakness, geopolitically, of the Western Balkans. It had recurrently found itself precariously perched at the interstices between the tectonic plates of global political machinations. Prior to WWI these plates consisted of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Over the course of WWII it was interspersed between Axis and Allied powers. Then, during the Cold War, Yugoslavia sat between the major spheres of influence - Western and Soviet - both ideologically and geographically.

Tito negotiated his nation's place in this context by attempting to unify a somewhat ethnically and religiously disparate peoples who had lived together over many centuries but had oscillated wildly between periods of internecine ethnic and religious conflict and peaceful co-existence. For him, only a unified Yugoslavia could stand up to destabilising internal and external powers. In many ways his approach succeeded.

Outwardly-facing, Tito's playbook included co-founding the Non-Aligned Movement, thumbing his nose at the Soviets in a way that other Eastern European nations were unable whilst also keeping the raging free-market capitalism of the West at bay. But it also involved a vast internal program that included the commissioning of a large body of public works that included the building of hundreds of concrete and steel monuments between the late 1950s and 1990.

These spomeniks, which looked toward a utopian view of the future and human possibility through tolerance, cooperation and self-betterment, were erected in all Yugoslav republics and autonomous territories. They were abstract forms containing elements of constructivist and brutalist architecture and design but also aspired to forging a unique Yugoslav style, albeit one that granted an element of autonomy to the many designers who contributed to the program. This plurality of style was partly fostered by the fact that the commissioning process was de-centralised, organised and approved through municipal bodies.

While this regional autonomy was beneficial in many ways it laid the groundwork for some troubling post-Tito outcomes. Tito's death in 1980 left a power void. The ruling entity of which

he was a part was, at least nominally, communist. This coincided with the thawing of communist Eastern Europe and the emergence of what would become the death rattles of the Soviet empire and its satellites. It was also a decade in which Yugoslav economy faced some troubling downturns.

Filling the power void and rushing to alleviate these concerns, nationalist hopefuls popped up in both the federal leadership and regional governments. These exploited the ethnic and religious heterogeneity of Yugoslavia, highlighting differences and past hurts and giving new voice to the latent threat of ethnic self-empowerment, all forces which Tito had largely quelled. Eventually this resulted in several national independence movements gaining serious traction. Serbia, as the seat of the Yugoslav parliament and dominant party to the allegiance (only by a slight degree), sought to maintain the federation. The ensuing conflicts between these two movements developed into what we now know of as the Balkan Wars of 1991-1995.

After the dust of the 1990s settled, the various constituent parts of the former Yugoslavia progressed towards their current existence in the form of six independent nations (Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia). Vojvodina has largely been subsumed by Serbia and now retains its autonomy in name only, whilst Kosovo remains a contested territory, recognised as an independent nation by the vast majority of EU member states but not by Serbia which considers it part of its sovereign territory. The tectonics of Balkan nationhood are never still for long with border disputes, both internal and external, still existing between most of these former members and/or with other foreign nations.

In these contexts we can see the overlaying of two historical geographies - the present day political map of the Balkans with that of a federalist meta-ethnic utopian constellation of spomenik design outcomes. Unfortunately the two are not always harmonious. Given the contrasting WWII allegiances of different elements of what became Yugoslavia and that the spomeniks often commemorated WWII battles from the perspective of the partisan victors it suddenly became possible in post-independence states to find spomeniks which commemorated victories against the forces that were now considered the progenitors of the state (Horvatinčić).

As noted, I offer this historical foray not to foreground an official history but to background it to possibilities of bottom-up history telling. Against all of this, and in order to contextualise, humans and non-human entities alike continue to exist in, around, through, because, and in spite of the shifting tectonics of the region's politics.

I also offer it as an argument for the choice of these sites to study. Monuments exist as loci of received official history. Just like the intended unassailability of official history, they are designed to be resilient and permanent. However, the world around them is in constant flux, calling into question their significance and situating them firmly within the tensions of the quotidian.

Specifically, people and non-human entities live amongst and alongside these sites. They are simultaneously part of both the social meshwork (to use another DeLanda-ism), the official meshworks and a total ecosystem (DeLanda 32). That is, they are concurrently petrifications and, by virtue of their location within a living ecology, evolving bodies.

We can consider these shifting historical flows as each imparting upon the sites layers of traces. These layers are indivisible and inextricable. Here we need to keep in mind our working notion of geological strata. Whereas we think of geology as only concerned with matter flows we can extend

the concept of strata to include not just matter but energy, duration and potential. Within these fields fits sound. Thus any given site can be thought of as being imbued with all of its pasts worth of sound. To the listener these may seem inaudible or not even being fit to be considered sounds, based on the time of their provenance. But what happens if we extend the conceptual definition of sound?

Stretching the envelope of sound

Our general heuristic for defining sound is based around an amplitude and frequency of vibrating matter sufficient to cause a human tympanic membrane to vibrate and in turn elicit a series of cochlear stimulations. But we routinely employ mechanisms to ‘correct’ environmental or sensorial ‘deficiencies’ through amplification, transposition and cancellation, thus allowing us to hear that which is otherwise inaudible. There exists in certain examples a will to hear where elsewhere there is reason to keep things unheard.

As the vibrational intensity of sounds degrade they approach what we traditionally consider the threshold of hearing - the point after which they no longer contain the energy volume required to move a tympanic membrane (or other non-human hearing apparatus).

However, by listening to the recordings that make up this work, one has the potential to hear a past as an infinitude of events. Not just the past-that-is-past, which is the temporal slice of time at which the recordings were captured, but much further back. Thus my concern is not with ‘hearing’ sounds at the infra- and ultra- ends of the human hearing spectrum (ie. those excluded by frequency) but rather with a ‘listening’ to those at the lower levels of amplitude, that we might consider excluded by time. The masking of these sounds could then be considered to be located in the imagination or the will rather than in the physical environment or the human auditory system.

We can note here Deleuze’s notion of pure history. The pure past for Deleuze is not a past into which things from the present pass, rather an absolute past “where all events, including those that have sunk without trace, are stored and remembered as their passing away” (Williams 94). Thus these sounds speak from before, from now and from the future. They constitute a cacophony to be heard. As Benjamin, touching on what is at stake by listening for events that don’t shout, wrote; “A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (Benjamin 2019 197).

Thus, listening to the past, in the form investigated by this project does not propose digging through dusty archives looking for buried recordings from bygone times. Though this form of endeavour has it’s value, the current investigation listens to any now and considers the reconstruction from it of any of its multiple, actual pasts.

Titel - *Example of a working approach*

Figure 2: Monument to Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Fascism (*Spomenik palim borcima i žrtvama fašizma*), Titel, Serbia.

To-date I have conducted field work at twenty-three spomenik sites across all republics and autonomous territories in the former Yugoslavia, with the exception of Kosovo. These sites were chosen from the hundreds that exist for their variety of locations, their features, intent and social contexts, rather than their popularity, architectural impressiveness, historical significance or accessibility. The vast majority of spomeniks were erected in rural or wild settings atop picturesque vantage points (often at or near the sites of battles). Comparatively few are situated in metropolitan areas or even amongst built-up areas.

In each of these locations, I documented the site through photography and audio recordings with the intention of presenting the recordings as a data set through which to trial a form of listening. As noted above, the comparison of these outcomes is itself a further emergent property of the process' serialisation.

A closer analysis of one of the recordings, made at the *Spomenik palim borcima i žrtvama fašizma* (Monument to Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Fascism) in Titel, Serbia in September 2019 will help illustrate the process. [Titel soundcloud link](#)

Throughout this recording we hear a mix of anthropogenic and non-human sounds. The background is made up of a chorus of cicadas and frogs, the distant thrum of traffic and the sounds of pre-recorded music. This background has a certain syrupy mass out of which leap certain foregrounded sounds - vehicles, dogs barking, the occasional breaching fish and some particularly strident cicadas. In the middle ground sit human conversations, laughter and the reactions of the surrounds to human intervention - gravel strewn behind car tyres and the river lapping at its banks in the wake of a boat. Our focus shifts continuously. Persisting with a material analysis, we can say that there's a certain sheen to the sounds. They are not for the most part gritty or dry, but rich.

Whilst there is a density to the sound field, spatially we are neither confined nor in a vast space. The level of vegetation in front of us sonically swallows up objects soon after they pass by us (the motorboat, for example) whilst behind us we find a certain reflectivity which throws the sound of the dog around us at certain points. There are elements fixed in space (a radio, human conversation, dogs together with moving actors (vehicles and their effects, mostly). There is a high level of contingency in the space - between one human voice and another, between barking dogs that set each other off, between vehicles and their effects (most noticeable in the case of the boat), between non-human elements in the tavern and in the complex bed of insects. This contingency extends temporally - many of these sounds would not be present at a different time of day or in a different season.

At other times in this site, we no longer hear cicadas or birds. The river is frozen over. No vehicles arrive for the purpose of fishing or disembarking tavern patrons, or the vehicles sound different. The air is dry and sounds are brittle. There are fewer sounds but they carry further.

These elements constitute the most immediately noticeable elements within the fabric of the site about which we are not told when we allow our readings of the site to be confined to the symbolically loud or the 'narratively significant'. If this recording is a slice, we must imagine an infinitude of slices, albeit artificially and arbitrarily delineated, that make up the complex story of the site. To each of these slices adhere memory in the form of traces of past action.

We can now note some of the historical overlays and social and geographical contexts of the site as they suggest the lived world of which the site is a part. They can also act as prompts with which to experience the past imbued in the recording.

The spomenik sits upon a promenade alongside the Tisa river, a major tributary of the central Danube river. On one bank of the river is the township of Titel, on the other a densely vegetated low-lying area. The closest human structures are a petrol station, a boat ramp and permanently moored floating tavern. It is night time. The early autumn still feels and sounds like summer. The sounds of human labour are minimal. The site's surroundings had given way to repose.

There is graffiti on the lower sections of the structure, evidence of human entanglement with the site. It is September so the snow and icy winds that maintain the slow seasonal excoriation of the structure are not to be evidenced but we know they have been present and will return. And the sun has just gone down so we can no longer see the foot and pawprints in the sand. We think of all of these as primarily visual traces but causally they all coincided with audible elements and this coexistence continues.

We can also expand our consideration temporally. We learn that many people visit the site on January 8 and May 9 each year for the last few decades. The first date coincides with raids made on the local population by occupying Axis-aligned Hungarian forces in 1942. Masses were forced out onto the frozen river whereupon the occupiers fired at the ice, shattering the crossing and leading to the death by drowning and exposure of 60-80 locals. How intensely do we have to listen in order to hear these shots, the screams, the breaking of ice, the commemoration, and finally the silence?

The geo-political location of the site also exerts an influence on its sound. Titel sits in Northern Serbia in the region of Vojvodina. Yugoslav-era monuments in Serbia are on the whole maintained, revered and commemorated more than those in Croatia as Serbia officially sees the Partisan WWII resistance as an integral part of its lineage. With this too comes a linguistic overlay. Vojvodina is a region with six official languages reflecting the movements of peoples over time (three are the official languages of neighbouring countries and one is the language of a landless minority) - more turbulence that comes with its own sounds. Pronunciations and regional dialects are highly localised, stratified sonic-objects themselves that are deposited constantly in their environments.

This far from an exhaustive catalogue. The point is that there is no end to the number of audible layers of any site that we can analyse in this way. Each one promotes a different voice, making superficial distillations disingenuous and ultimately impracticable.

The spomenik is thus a locus around which are situated all of these elements. Read in this way the site is one of hyper-complexity, contested readings and a multitude of contradictory forces. Thus it becomes the antithesis of what was intended for it ie. a simplification, a summary, a representative entity, the value of which trumps all other actual and potential histories and contingencies of the site. Though rather than simply diminish the significance of one history, multi-histories are allowed to speak, regardless of species, type, or volume and without judgement.

Jasenovac

[Jasenovac Soundcloud link](#)



Figure 3: Flower Monument (*Cvjetni spomenik*) at Jasenovac Spomenik Memorial Park, Croatia. We can compare this example to another recording in the series, this time made at *Cvjetni spomenik* (the Flower Monument), just outside of Jasenovac on the Croatian side of the Sava River which forms the border with Bosnia & Herzegovina.

This time we are transported to a much larger space. The sounds of the open grassy plain coalesce into a dense but subdued complexity. Above this, only just, appear the faint details of birds and a truck. On an anthropocentric level the site sounds vacant except for occasional traffic on a narrow highway in the foredistance.

The sound is granular and dry and sound-objects disperse with few surfaces to reflect them. Yet, this recording is taken from within the semi-enclosed spomenik structure, meaning that everything we hear contains the audible resonance of concrete (above and to the sides) and timber (beneath). The concrete structure has stood in place since 1966 and the sand of which it consists may come from the adriatic hinterland to the west (an interesting illustration of the interfacing of mineral exoskeletons with the commodity flows of the anthropocene).

The timber lengths that form the floor are in fact the timber sleepers that once undergirded the railway line that trafficked prisoners from all over Eastern Europe to the concentration camp that stood on this site during WWII. These sleepers bear the sounds of the trains that ran over them and their inhabitants, the workers who positioned them as part of the spomenik complex, visitors to the site as well as the sounds of their growth and inhabitation whilst part of living plants.

Jasenovac is a site that has repeatedly been subjected to extensive geological disturbances - the seasonal floodings of the Sava and Una rivers and the depositing of their silt, the tilling of them as pastoral lands, the constructions and burials during WWII and the reformation and removal of large amounts of soil during the construction of Bogdan Bogdanović's sculptural works. We can think of these actions as the churnings of memories and the sounds that adhere to them, sequestered in the earth until excavated but ultimately fragmentary and unstable.

Conclusion

Spectral Geologies posits sound as a sedimentary phenomenon that can be excavated and sifted for memory akin to the way geological strata inform us of the conditions of past ages - ie. that within sound we can hear, however faint, the murmured traces of the past. In seeking to uncover those sounds that were once present, the research questions whether there is any significant difference, pragmatically-speaking, between the sounds we hear and the sounds we think, in turn entertaining a mode of listening which enables the listener to hear the past in new *inaudible* ways.

As shown in the examples provided, when we listen with ears to the less obvious what we hear is neither tranquil nor under-populated but cacophonous. What is more, these voices to be heard are not limited to the audible. Whereas Lacey (2013) notes that "acoustic space is a 'resonant sphere' with no centre and no margins' (6), I argue that this expansive definition also extends to its temporality.

The promise is that we can use this method to tell histories in a multi-directional, dynamic process which both goes to and moves away from the sound-of-place. By initially considering sound in isolation of other sensory realms I aim to mitigate the drowning-out effect vision can have on audition, to ask what we can conceive of hearing when we listen both to our world and to the mind's ear.

An element inherent to presenting these audio recordings is that they represent a listening out of place and time. The listening-to-any-now-in-order-to-consider-its-multiple-actual-pasts, is only ultimately possible through a fully embodied listening on-site and in-time rather than a recording. From my vantage point I was afforded this embodied listening in the process of capturing the recordings. In the examples cited, as the field recordist I am positioned as a listener but also a body in the recordings. This echoes McLuhan and McLuhan's conception of acoustic space as "a flux in which figure and ground rub against and transform each other" (qtd. in Lacey 5).

However, there are unique perspectives to be gained from listening via pre-recorded mediums that honour the perturbability and fluidity of time. These recordings exist as prompts for a consideration of these sites. What can we speculate upon hearing when we listen to them? How can we use the recordings to cross reference with other remnants of the quotidien?

This approach should not be confused with that of the acoustic ecologist whose focus is on the preservation and advocacy of an ideal form of nature usually endangered by anthropogenic activity. Whereas such an approach seeks to freeze ecologies, my approach seeks neither to commit this same mistake nor on the converse to allow a history to remain petrified or monolithic, but rather to create a conversation between all environmental agents that determine a soundscape. At the heart of the approach is a notion of flux stemming from a Bergsonian sense of duration - that is, we can never know the position of the now, only points in the past.

This project finds that the only adequate reading of these sites is one which is either a- or plurally narrative-based. Thus it doesn't seek in any way to be revisionist in the common sense of swapping one dominant narrative for another. Either narrative is something to be unsettled through an allowance for its infinitude of possibilities or it is simply a non-question.

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