

Juxtaposing Anthropocenic and Natural Rhythms in My Video-Sound Art Explorations

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Abstract

This essay talks about my video-sound art explorations of the difference between rhythm of the Anthropocene and rhythm of non-human nature. While the art work *Third Eye Observing the Anthropocene* primarily shows accelerating relentless rhythm of the Anthropocene, the *Forgotten Landscapes* trilogy, following Hepburn's theory, tries to observe nature with all senses at once in order to get the full aesthetic experience of nature. The trilogy juxtaposes the sounds of nature (wind, waves, birds) with human noises (humans being distracted with their cell phones, music, and chat), ultimately showing that if one closely listens to the natural sounds of a place, one can perhaps hear voices of fairies, see footprints of giants, and experience magic of wizards. The essay is accompanied with links to these art works or the excerpts from these art works.

Keywords: Anthropocene, rhythm, nature, video-sound art

This essay talks about two of my video-sound art works: *Third Eye Observing the Anthropocene* and *Forgotten Landscapes* trilogy. These works along with this essay will take the audience on a poetic journey exploring the fusion and juxtaposition of human and non-human soundscapes. While the first art work primarily presents accelerating rhythm of the Anthropocene, the second one juxtaposes Anthropocenic rhythms and rhythms of non-human nature to explore the disconnect Anthropocene humans most often have toward nature, as well as the need and some possibilities for reconnection.

One of the main features of the Anthropocene is alienation, both of humans from nature and among humans themselves. Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel once pointed out that there is a connection between human denial of nature and human "becoming a subject" (Hegel 285). In their denial of nature, human beings also deny their animal nature, which participated in the constitution of their subjectivity. By reducing nature only to their own needs, humans create a new world - a world only for humans - the Anthropocene. By doing so, they transform themselves into negative subjects - subjects deprived of their natural being - subjects that live in discordance and dissonance with non-human nature. With the development of technologies, including digital technologies, this alienation becomes deeper. This discordance is shown in both of my video-sound art works.

The work *Third Eye Observing the Anthropocene* (Popov <https://youtu.be/m3YTpiZl6Zc>), shot in Central Park in New York City, explores the relentless rhythm of the Anthropocene that is in discordance with the natural rhythm. Guitar, drums, and saxophone in this work compete one another, and form a cacophony that is further distorted by machine made noise. Processed through this unnatural rhythm of the Anthropocene, even a landscape becomes visual pollution. Noise as the rhythm of the Anthropocene, in a broader sense does not only refer to sound pollution, but also to a fast-paced life itself. Caught in this frantic rhythm of life, dictated by digital technological acceleration, the Anthropocene humans are constantly bombarded by sound and visual pollution,

as well as ever-growing list of tasks they lure humans into. Like some type of contemporary Sisyphus, the Anthropocene humans are frustrated since they can never complete all these tasks. Afraid that they will miss something in a world where everything is instant, their short-lived attention jumps from one stimulant to another. Trained by this rhythm, humans can neither slow down, nor exit this enchanted, accelerating rhythm. Therefore, both the sound and the video of the *Third Eye Observing the Anthropocene* show acceleration. The art work starts and ends abruptly, since this rhythm has no melody - no beginning or end.

Technological development, such as use of various machines and pollutants created ecological imbalance - a disharmony. Acoustic diversity shaped by natural selection over millions of years is being challenged by noise pollution, which developed rapidly over a much shorter ecological time scale (Slabbekoorn and Ripmeester 72-83). As the result, the environment is left silent or discordant, as Bernie Krause noted (Krause 10). With the decrease in animal populations, populations of plant and other organisms, as well as multiple species extinction, many sounds have vanished too. Once rich and ever-changing harmonious soundscape, a natural rhythm or natural meshwork, as Ingold would call it, is lost (Ingold, *Being* 69-70). The remaining non-human species try to adapt to noise that has come as a replacement for harmonious soundscape. Sound pollution - a noise is a new type of meshwork. This ever-growing and more and more disruptive anthrophony is layered by sounds of traffic, industrial facilities, machines, human voices, etc. as shown in the second part of my video-sound art work *Forgotten Landscapes: Listening to the Voices of the Fairies* (Popov <http://youtu.be/KpsfqKUJnWo>). Recorded at a well-known tourist place in Northern Ireland, art work shows how a harmonious natural soundscape abruptly vanishes and gets replaced with the silence at first, and then with the disruptive sounds of the Anthropocene - a manmade meshwork. In this case, the meshwork is created by tourists that are taking over the soundscape with their loud talking, laughing, screaming, playing, cell phone ringing, camera clicking, traffic noise, etc. While being constantly distracted with their cell phone screens, music, chat, and selfies, people rarely take the time to actually experience their surroundings, such as natural world in front of them. The rhythm of non-human nature is submerged beneath the noise created by humans and their various machines.

Many human activities are very noisy and cause acoustic modifications, which may affect both humans and animals (Barber et al. 180-189; Brooks et al. 30-40). For example, the plethora of urban and industrial soundscapes can cause various human illnesses from hearing loss, stress, and insomnia to heart problems and cognitive development (Passchier-Vermeer and Passchier 123-131).

However, Anthropocene humans are so accustomed to this ever-present background sound that they almost no longer notice it, and they can hardly imagine the world without it. Noise become the norm. The harmonious polyphony of the natural world is no longer the norm and is thus perceived by Anthropocene humans as strange, exotic, boring, and even frightening.

At the roots of this attitude, non-human nature is considered by human beings (particularly by those in Western civilization) to be less valuable than them, and worth only as a resource for exploitation. Non-human nature thus, gradually takes on the qualities of the Other. Tim Ingold concludes that modern humans are arrogant because they belittle the animistic understanding of nature (understanding of nature as equally, if not more important than human beings), because they take their (Western) metaphysics - their alienation from nature - as the standard, according to which they judge and assess the animistic connection with nature (Ingold, *The Perception* 75).

My video-sound trilogy *Forgotten Landscapes* features immersive interdependent natural soundscapes that symbolize animistic perception of nature, as well as juxtaposes them with the Anthropocenic soundscape. This work explores ancient landscapes that look as forgotten as the mythological beings that formed and inhabited them according to ancient beliefs. With the dimension of nostalgia, the first artwork in this trilogy, *Listening to the Voices of the Fairies* features the sound of the wind that transforms into the voices of fairies and back to the sound of the wind in the first part of the video-sound artwork (Popov <https://youtu.be/vYXFFXZjjqc>). Both sounds are created by the same voice to signify the pre-Anthropocene soundscape that, as Krause noted, has evolved over millions of years to a harmonious polyphony, where living things learned how to match their sounds with the sounds of their surrounding such as, wind, rain, waterfalls, and other living things (Krause 10). In the footsteps of Korean Pansori singers that take pilgrimage to holy mountains to tune their voices with waterfalls, I took a pilgrimage to these ancient landscapes to tune my voice with harsh Atlantic winds and waves that circulate around rock formations that they have been carving over millions of years.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, this first part in the *Forgotten Landscapes* trilogy ends with Anthropocenic soundscape that consists of human and machine noises, as well as natural sounds (such as wind and birds) that can hardly compete with the noise. The second and the third artwork in the trilogy act as answers to this Anthropocenic dissonance presented in the first video-sound artwork. *Following the Giant's Footsteps*, the second work in the series, features only the natural sound of waves, while the camera moves in a slow motion over the unusual pavement of glacial-era limestone covered in endemic flora and puddle-filled cracks that resemble giant footprints (Popov <https://youtu.be/FhE0VNINWJMS>). The sound of crashing waves evokes the footsteps of a giant. Giants and fairies in the trilogy represent extinct species, not only mythological species, but also animal and plant species that have disappeared during ongoing 6th extinction. Intentionally isolated wave sound and the slow rhythm of the video focus the viewer's attention on the landscape, and, perhaps with this serenity of a quiet landscape transport the viewer into another era or realm.

While this second part of the *Forgotten Landscape* trilogy tries to teach humans to slow down and tune to the natural rhythm, the third part of the trilogy, *Observing the Wizard Islands* attempts to remind humans to respect non-human nature. The work shows the sublime qualities of nature, such as strong winds and waves that roughly carved frighteningly high cliffs, and threatening sound of ravens as if to remind humans that non-human nature is powerful and can show its own wizardry, and fight disharmony created by humans (Popov <https://youtu.be/8EcfBCjOzWA>).

Ultimately, the message that the *Forgotten Landscape* video-sound art work wants to convey is that if, while walking through ancient landscapes, one does show respect to non-human nature and take the time to closely observe its unique geological features, endemic flora and fauna, as well as listen to the wind, waves, and animal sounds, one can perhaps hear the voices of fairies, shapeshifting wizards, or footsteps of giants. In his aesthetics of engagement based on a non-cognitive approach, Arnold Berleant noted that momentary perceptual experience and non-scientific components, such as imagination, memory, collective memory and the like, are important for the aesthetic experience of nature (Berleant 231). In his phenomenological approach to experience, he pointed out that the subject is actively involved in the creation of his aesthetic experience (Berleant 238). He looked here at Immanuel Kant, who defines aesthetic judgment as the common product of the free play of the imagination, the perceptual qualities of the object, and the understanding of the subject (Kant 95).

In order to be able to have a full aesthetic experience of nature, as my art works try to show, one needs to first take time and be fully present. To achieve this full embodiment with one's natural surrounding one needs to exit the Anthropocenic rhythm and to enter the natural rhythm. Therefore, the video-sound art work *Third Eye Observing the Anthropocene* juxtaposes the frantic rhythm with a still vibrating halo-like eye in the center of the video. This third eye that represents the wisdom and the vibrating harmony of energy of life, observes the Anthropocene in a meditative solitude. This hardly achievable solitude is precisely what Anthropocene humans need to ground them - to bring them to a present moment and to tune them to the harmonious natural rhythm. Once focused on the present moment, they can perceive the entire environment with all their senses, which is also the prerequisite for the full aesthetic experience of nature, as Hepburn pointed out (Hepburn 46). Human beings do not fully enter into all the beauties and qualities of nature without their active engagement with nature (simultaneously observing the landscape, listening to the chirping of birds, walking through nature, smelling flowers, etc.).

The immersion into harmonious natural soundscape-landscape not only has aesthetic, but also healing properties, as known since ancient times and confirmed with many recent studies (e.g., Deng et al.; Marselle et al. 134–147; Kardan et al. 11610). Studies have also shown that engagement with nature on a day-to-day basis have a positive impact on academic and professional performance (Berto 249-259; Evensen et al. 99-105; DeLoach et al. 2291), as well as on cognitive development (Van Hedger et al. 522-530; Dadvand et al. 7937-7942).

For the full aesthetic experience of nature, as mentioned in this essay and shown in my *Forgotten Landscapes* sound-art trilogy, one needs to observe nature with all senses at once. This would be possible if humans manage to escape the accelerating rhythm of the Anthropocene (illustrated in my *Third Eye Observing the Anthropocene* art work) by focusing their attention on the present moment (not on distractions), as conveyed in all of my sound-art works presented in this essay. If humans learn how to integrate themselves more closely with acoustic ecology of non-human nature, this would further lead to the creation of an environmental soundscape where man-generated sounds and the sounds of non-human nature coexist in harmonious polyphony.

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Dr. Milena Popov is an interdisciplinary artist and a scholar with a PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies (Art and Media Theory), and a MFA and a BFA in Painting and Art Education. Popov teaches art and

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