

All I heard in Cushendall

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Of course the following pages do not cover *all* that I heard in Cushendall during my residency in the Curfew Tower from September to October 2010. They do, however, constitute a fair representation of six weeks of enhanced aural awareness. Every day (well, most days, anyway. . .), I devoted a continuous period of time to listening to the sounds of Cushendall. I would sit down for an hour or so in some location in the Curfew Tower or its proximity and write down what I'd hear. I did so in one continuous flow without punctuation, borrowing a technique by Peter Ablinger, who I am indebted to for sharing it. My intention was to apply his technique to the same environment over an extended period of time, and the present diary is the result of this process.

Peter Ablinger has noted that the process of writing matches the stream-like nature of acoustic experience.¹ Anthony Moore even speculates that the alphabet itself came into being as an early form of a 'sound recorder', which effectively 'stores' the sounds of the human voice for later 'playback' (i.e. reading). He points out that ancient Greek writing—similarly to the listening annotations in this diary—"had no groupings or spaces between words, no punctuation, just endless strings of letters, a pure ribbon of sound".² But why should the written description of a listening experience constitute a work of art? Art, I would argue, is mainly about observation. A good painter, for example, is arguably—and maybe primarily—a good observer. The excellent written accounts of everyday environments by able novelists are further examples of 'art through observation'. Personally, I cannot see a significant difference between the description of a sensory experience and an artistic expression.

Although my aural encounter with Cushendall was of course deeply personal, it still leaves a clear trace of the cultural context within which it occurred. For example, the reader will find that descriptions of traffic sounds feature ubiquitously in my writing. I do not wish to derive any moral judgement from this experience; for example whether there should be less cars on our streets. Anyone sitting down in the centre of Cushendall (or virtually any other town of the industrialised world, for that matter) will find her or his acoustic experience dominated by the sounds of traffic. However, I consider it important to remember that this was not always the case, and that the acoustic environment shapes us and our culture in ways which we are not always fully aware of, be it for the better or for the worse.

The present written account inevitably also reflects my own involvement with Cushendall during my stay. When the hurling balls of the local kids were knocking on the Curfew Tower's windows as I was writing this diary, I could hardly have remained a neutral observer. Getting out my diary in the local pubs would reliably yield a wealth of questions and comments by interested bystanders; in fact, it was far from clear who was observing whom in this process. And when I communicated with the locals through my foreign accent, which they probably found just as exotic as I did theirs, my listening turned from an aesthetic experience into something very down-to-earth. To me, that is the joy of the ear: that the beautiful is never far from the mundane.

¹Ablinger, Peter: *Weiss/weisslich 11b*, <http://ablinger.mur.at/docu02.html>

²Moore, Anthony: 'Transactional Fluctuations 1: Towards an Encyclopedia of Sound'. In: Siegfried Zielinski & Eckhard Furlus *Variantology 3: On Deep Time Relations of Arts, Sciences and Technologies*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln 2008, pp.295–304.

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