

'And she flies! Beautiful': the dislocating geography of football sound<sup>1</sup>

Margaret Trail

Copyright©2013 Margaret Trail. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged.

**Abstract:** The overarching interest of this paper is in articulating the affective conditions of football's play. It undertakes this through a consideration of the sonorous dimension of football, mapping its sounds across a framework borrowed from recent writings on sound-art and sonic geography. Specifically it considers a continuum articulated by Will Scrimshaw (in relation to sound art exploring spatial notions), between sounds-of-place and sound-as-a-place. It then places sounds produced in football-play across this continuum, to see whether football's sonic practices can be more finely articulated through doing so, and might in turn shed light on its affective conditions.

**Keywords:** sonic geography, sound art, football sound

### A sonic geography

The notion of a sonic geography has been investigated over recent decades by both theorists and artists; in her editorial for a recent issue of *Interference*, Rachel O'Dwyer connects this emergence with that general epistemological shift that has challenged the notion of Cartesian space: 'Audio spatial practices ... implicitly challenge the concept that a terrain is somehow comprised of elements that are straightforwardly empirical, objective and mappable' (O'Dwyer 2011, 1). Against this has arisen the idea, and possibility, of spaces that are built from an interrelation with perception, subjective and contingent, structured by virtuality and so on.

More specifically, the articulation of a sonic geography is inseparably connected with the development of recording technologies and phonography over the last century or so. Phonography is seen to have inaugurated the conceptual field and acoustic palette of *all sound* (Kahn 1999, 9). All sound is an audible event that not only includes every sound but also beyond-sound: 'phonography did not simply produce sounds or ideas about

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a contribution to the *Placescape, placemaking, placemarking, placedness ... geography and cultural production* Special Issue of *Coolabah*, edited by Bill Boyd & Ray Norman. The Special Issue is supported by two websites: <http://coolabahplacedness.blogspot.com.au> and <http://coolabahplacedness-images.blogspot.com.au/>.

sounds but produced audibility, it heard past physiological constraints to the imaginary realms of conceptual sounds, ancient and future sounds, voices of inner speech and the dead, subatomic vibrations and so on ...' (Kahn 1999, 9). This *all sound* – audibility itself – with its character of dislocating liquidity, is part of what has moved against the notion of stable Cartesian space over the past century or so, assisting in the articulation of different notions of space: dislocating and liquid space, sonic geography.

Part of what has been brought into being by phonography and *all sound* is a tension between what we might call sounds-of-place, and sound-as-a-place. As recording technologies have become more portable and inexpensive, artists have been drawn to explore the sounds of particular places – soundscapes, sound marks – most notably in the practices of acoustic ecology (see Schafer's seminal *The Tuning of the World* (1977)). However, also of course, artists have departed from the project of collecting sounds-of-place, using phonographic techniques to adventure in the ungrounded geography of sound itself. We might think of John Cage's *Imaginary Landscapes*, compositions that use amplification effects, not to produce recordings of the world, but rather sounds of the imaginary, invoking 'not a physical landscape [but] a landscape in the future ... as though you used technology to take you off the ground and go like Alice through the looking glass' (Cage 2011; Dyson 1992, 378–382).

We might say that the tension between these two poles, sounds-of-place, and sound-as-a-place (sounds through the looking-glass) is a characteristic of the sonic geography that has emerged with the advent of *all sound*. In a recent article, Will Scrimshaw teases out this relation, focussing on sound-art compositions that occupy both poles, and the interzone between them (Scrimshaw 2011).

## **The grounded and the ungrounded**

Scrimshaw writes about (indeed, as a sound artist himself, *makes*: Scrimshaw 2012) sound-art compositions that combine an interest in site-specificity – their contextual dependence on specific locations, and the acoustic properties of these – with a sonority that moves 'away from the specific through a practice of abstraction or schizophrenic dislocation ... towards the ambiguous spatial productivity of sonic energy in general' (Scrimshaw 2011, 5).

He offers the example of *Airport Symphony*, a CD collection of compositions by different artists based on field recordings made at Brisbane Airport. Scrimshaw notes how these works make 'use of sounds occupying spaces between the specific, generic and general' (Scrimshaw 2011, 2). They are not merely field recordings of Brisbane airport (specific), neither reflections on the environment of *an* airport (generic), nor sonic compositions that gesture beyond the airport (general). Rather the works play across these possibilities, resulting in 'the composition of something often beautiful and singular, if unspecific' (Scrimshaw 2011, 2). In this and other examples he explores ways in which phonography produces an interconnected condition between the specific or grounded, and 'the more ambiguous notion of a site of sound in general' (Scrimshaw 2012, 7).

His perspective amounts to an assertion that *all sound* – that audibility arising from phonographic technology – inevitably comprises contextual and symbolic dimensions, as well as a dislocating property that tips it away from the identifiable towards abstraction. Thus, that the geography of sound always, to some degree, exceeds its groundedness in specific locations, opening towards ‘that which ceaselessly ungrounds and undermines place in the ceaseless production of space’ (Scrimshaw 2011, 6).

## **The geography of football**

Scrimshaw’s articulation of this relation between the grounded and the ungrounded in sound art, has particular interest for me, a writer preoccupied with the sounds of football, which at first glance seems a most grounded, and identifiable phenomenon (Trail 2009). The sounds of football are striking in part because of their exciting specificity, their relation with particular events – football games. However they seem also to possess a wide range of affects that depart these events, but which are less easy to articulate than the identifiable sound markers that saturate games. The opportunity arising here is to map some of football’s distinct sonic properties across Scrimshaw’s continuum, to see if this might help articulate these affects, and to flesh out a dimension of football that is not bound to the site of its games, but perhaps exceeds them in inventive and productive ways.

It will assist at the outset to describe football in a way that allows us to think of it as something more than its grounded specificity in football games. I would like to make use of a description made by the wonderful philosopher of movement and virtuality, Brian Massumi. Massumi describes football games as an intertwined relation between an *event-space*, and an *event-dimension*. The event-space is empirical space, the grounded and particular site in which play occurs (for instance, the football oval), ‘in which the substantial terms in play intermix’ (bodies, ball, boundaries). On the other hand, and entwined with this, is the event-dimension or field of play ‘through which the substantial elements interrelate’ (Massumi 2002, 76). This is an invisible but still real field of becoming, through which play occurs. It enables the interrelation and belonging-together of all of the things in play, ‘it is more fundamentally a field of potential than a substantial thing or object ... the play in itself is groundless and limitless’ (Massumi 2002, 72).

Massumi’s description advances the possibility that it is the event-dimension, or field of play, that defines football, rather than the rule-bound program of professional games we are all familiar with, and if this is so, well then football occurs not only on football ovals, but in back yards, and streets, in cars and living rooms, in all sites where play emerges, drawing bodies, and objects into relation together. Furthermore, when we think of the space/s that football occupies, we can now think of this both as empirical space/s, and invisible space/s of emerging potential, a combination of concrete spaces and objects, and abstract spaces that are nevertheless real.

Now, with this expanded understanding of what football is and where it takes place, we can return to our thinking about football sound; wondering about the nature of its geography, and how sounds work there.

## Referential sound in football's play

Taking this opportunity to map (or perhaps scribble, since the technique will be playful and speculative, rather than bound to a precise model of representation) some of football's distinct sonic properties across Scrimshaw's continuum, I will begin by considering certain identifiable sounds – sounds that are referential and/or symbolic – then I will speculate about what happens to them, in relation to displacement towards abstraction.

### *thwock!*

The sound of the boot on the ball is a *sound mark* in football. Scrimshaw borrows this term from the acoustic ecologists, to refer to 'recurrent sound events considered characteristic of a locale' (Scrimshaw 2011, 3). In football the particular place in which the sound mark is originally made is not so important. For the sound mark/s of football can appear in the car (we hear them on the radio), drift through the window when we are sick in bed, call to us when we are walking down the street, or picnicking at the beach. Football sounds travel. The sound mark boot-on-ball is not native to *a* place. Rather it marks *football* in whatever place it is heard, where football is that expanded dimension of play described above. The locale that the sound of boot-on-ball refers to, is football's event-dimension: play.

Boot-on-ball is a sound that seems almost inevitably produced whenever football's play dimension is activated – even if we are listening to a game in the car, feet may twitch, and sound of impact be reproduced in slapping the steering wheel or armrest. I contend, this sound – *thwock* – and certain other sounds of impact: bodies colliding, sound of football/running, and the calls of players on-ground, all serve in some fundamental way to mark *football*. They can be thought of as occupying the epicentre of the referential sound dimension of football's play. Expanding our understanding of this referential dimension we might then consider those linguistic versions of games that attend football games, such as media commentary and barracking. Whilst these may not be fundamental to it, nevertheless they are commonplace sonic practices that refer to football in particular.

### *ball!*

Commentary's referentiality is obvious. It has the function of communicating the unfolding drama of *a game* to a remote audience. Barracking – the cries and commands of the spectators – is also a sonic practice that refers to a particular game. Furthermore both of these refer to football's play dimension in general. Consider how players in scratch football games or in practice forms like kick-to-kick or wall-ball, often provide playful commentary for themselves: *She lines it up ... Oh, that is beautiful!* This is not 'real' commentary, with intent to communicate the action of a game to remote audiences, but rather refers to football's field of play. Phrases from barracking are used in the same way. Calls that might be heard in the crowd on match day, reappear in informal play contexts: *Ball!* we might cry, or *In the back!* Once again, this is not

refereed play, the phrases do not mean what they do in formal games. Rather, they conjure the event-dimension of football, they refer to football's play.

Following Scrimshaw's notion of a continuum between sounds-of-place and sound-as-a-place, our next question should be: but does football sound depart this referentiality, this pointing back to itself? Does its sonic geography ever open onto the other affects that Scrimshaw is interested in, that opposite pole: 'moving ... towards the ambiguous spatial productivity of sonic energy in general' (Scrimshaw 2011, 5)? While there may be no aesthete at work in it, no singular composer, I think we can nevertheless advance the possibility that a kind of embedded practice exists in the sonic geography of football that does approach this other pole of the continuum.

### **Beyond referentiality ...**

We have noted above the incorporation of referential signs of commentary and barracking in informal versions of football play, and said that they no longer 'mean' when they pop up in these new sites, or not what they did before. They still refer (to football) but there has been a dislocation. This dislocation is a fundamental condition of sounding. Sound is nimble, it moves from the site of its production, whether simply through the air, or by means of recording and transmission, or via chains of message-giving, *word-of-mouth*. In the case of self-commentary during a round of kick-to-kick, however, the dislocation is not simply translocation in space and time, but also a shift of registers from the serious to the playful: language moves from the task of communication to the play of joking.

### ***haha!***

This dislocation of serious language is a distinctive feature of the sonic geography of football. For all its seriousness, football is thick with joking. Banter, wit, ribaldry are all styles of joke-language that pervade it. They swirl through it on ground, in the crowd, throughout sports media, and in the practice of making wry asides relating to football in social settings that are not football (known colloquially as 'taking your boots along'). It is my contention that these practices of joking are a feature of football's sonic geography in which sound makes a move from referentiality towards abstraction.

Paolo Virno has written about the abstraction of jokes. Of particular interest his view that 'jokes are well defined linguistic games, equipped with unique techniques whose remarkable function consists ... in *exhibiting the transformability of all linguistic games*' (Virno 2008, 72–73, his emphasis). Which is to say, jokes refer, but what they refer to is the potential undoing of all language, the contingency of representation. This is why I claim them for sonic abstraction within football. The work they do is to unsettle groundedness and particularity, countering serious language – commands, judgement calls and analysis – with irreverence, evasiveness, ungrounded assertions and laughter.

### ***roar!***

The other strand of football sound that tends towards abstraction, away from referential sound marks, is the practice of noise. Football noise is produced most obviously by large crowds in football stadiums, during football games. Of course this noise, the roar of the football crowd, is made up of words; commands and chants that refer explicitly to play. However, when produced by a crowd, these words develop an additional power, that of noise, which shifts or doubles the work of words with a non-referential dimension. Noise is non-referential in the sense that it disturbs perception, it does not 'mean'. Paul Hegarty: 'noise [blocks] thought, blocks attempts to structure meaning and coherence' (Hegarty 2007, 145). The gigantic sound mustered by crowds in stadiums surpasses the work of shouting directions to players that the crowd is nevertheless involved in. As it gathers volume, crowd-sound gathers intent to wound and confuse, to rupture and sweep away possibility of composure in the opponent. This perception-disturbing power of noise is deployed in football as a combative weapon.

### ***hiss ...***

Furthermore noise-weaponry is not only made from high-volume crowd-sound, but appears in other, quieter, ways as well. For instance in the use of sledging, or vile language, that opponents direct at each other during play (See Trail 2010 for a discussion of this in relation to racial vilification). Sledging aims to 'psych out' or disturb the concentration of the opponent. Following Hegarty again, noise is understood here as an excess, a too-muchness, that 'happens to "me", is beyond my control ... threatens me, is part of the other I define myself against' (Hegarty 2007, 4). While sledging is referential and symbolic, it nevertheless partakes of the logic of noise. Excess to normal conversation, it is too much, uninvited, it threatens, and seeks to scramble meaning and coherence through verbal assault. In both of these examples, noise is at work in football's play, as a sonic phenomenon mustered to attack the referential and symbolic, opening a dimension of sound production that is not *for* communication, but rather to shut it down.

## **Conclusion**

To gather. We have been speculating about the geography of football sound, placing its sounds on a continuum that extends from sounds-of-place through to sound-as-a-place; where sounds-of-place are markers, referential and/or symbolic, and sound-as-a-place is a more abstract destination containing an obscure sonic productivity that has real affects, even though neither referential nor symbolic. Certain sounds – boot-on-ball, bodies colliding, whistles, the calls of players – we have proposed lie at the epicentre of football referentiality. Then we have traced outwards (towards abstraction) through language-versions of play – commentary and barracking – that are adapted in informal play variations of the game, and on to the ungrounded and disjunctive language practices of jokes. At the pole position of football-sound abstraction we have placed noise, in which language-sounds gather force sufficient to undo thinking and coherence, seeking to wound through disturbing power. No doubt these abstractions – jokes, noise – still lie close to the referential, and for all their disruptiveness, still draw upon

football's event-dimension for their affective power (in other words, they need football to exist at all). Nevertheless they do also indicate how even a sport as obsessed with concrete effects as football is, produces in its sounding, a range of effects and affects that are in excess of the empirical spaces and substantial terms we usually think of in defining it.

This style of speculation has the potential to bring detail to our understandings of what football is, or might be. Sound is at work in football throughout a geography – tacitly understood by its participants – that exceeds the empirical sites of football games. Football-dislocated-in-sound migrates across a set of sites whose boundaries are indistinct but which are nevertheless marked, by sonic and speech signs, and practices of wit and noise that have real effects. This way of perceiving and thinking about football enables a shift, a lift-off, from conceiving of it always as bounded by empirical space/s. It presents instead the opportunity to see how its play articulates across this range of interconnecting sites: concrete and invisible, referential and abstract. This in turn has the potential to extend our knowledge of football's affects ... if we have the patience to listen.

## References

- Cage J. (2011) *The Works for Percussion I*, Mode Records, New York, CD booklet.
- Dyson, F. (1992) 'The Ear that Would Hear Sounds in Themselves: John Cage 1935-1965', in Kahn, D and Whitehead, G (eds) *Wireless Imagination: Sound Radio and the Avant Garde*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.
- Hegarty, P. (2007) *Noise/Music: A History*, Continuum, New York and London.
- Kahn, D. (1999) *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, MIT press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.
- Massumi B. (2002) *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Duke University Press, Durham & London.
- O'Dwyer, R. (2011) 'Editorial: A Sonic Geography: Rethinking Auditory Spatial Practices', *Interference: A Journal of Audio Culture*, issue 2 <<http://www.interferencejournal.com>> accessed 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2012.
- Schafer, R. M. (1994) [1977] *The Soundscape: and the Tuning of the World*, Destiny Books, Vermont.
- Scrimshaw, W. (2011) 'Any Place Whatever: Schizophonic Dislocation and the Sound of Space in General', *Interference: A Journal of Audio Culture*, Issue 2 <<http://www.interferencejournal.com>> accessed 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2012
- Scrimshaw, W. (2012) *Works* <<http://willschrimshaw.net/category/work/>> accessed 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2012.
- Trail, M. (2009) "'there's the siren!'" aurality and representation of the sounds of (Australian) football', Unpublished doctoral thesis, School of Communication and the Arts, Victoria University.
- Trail, M. M. (2010) 'Sonic trickery in swarming play: football's dangerous fun' *Double Dialogues*, Issue 13, Summer <[http://www.doubledialogues.com/issue\\_thirteen/Trail.html](http://www.doubledialogues.com/issue_thirteen/Trail.html)> accessed 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2012.

Virno, P. (2008) *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles.

**Margaret Meran Trail** is a Senior Lecturer in Performance Studies at Victoria University, Melbourne. A graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts, School of Drama, she has many years experience as a performance maker, and a special interest in the effects and affects of sound in theatre. Her PhD thesis, “*there’s the siren!*” *aurality and representation of the sounds of Australian football*’, was completed in 2009, and won the Vice Chancellors Peak Award for Research Excellence in that year. She continues her research into sonic affect through writing, composition and performance. (College of Arts, Victoria University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Email: Margaret.Trail@vu.edu.au)